HELLO, IS THERE ANYBODY OUT THERE?

Kenneth Martin – known as Kenny to those who knew him, although these days not many did – peered out of his apartment window from behind bleached curtains. He was an old man, aged sixty-four with a firm potbelly which protruded alarmingly over the belt of his pants, and a speckled scalp evincing the tufted grey remnants of a once full head of hair. His face, somewhat grave and jaded-looking, was permanently knotted in a frown.

He glanced over at the clock on the wall. It was 4.14 in the afternoon. Today was Friday; yes, it was definitely Friday. He adjusted the packet of Arnott’s assorted creams he’d placed on the coffee table; then peered back outside the window at the empty courtyard. Estelle was nearly fifteen minutes late now.

It was fine, he told himself; he would watch television while he waited, and deceive himself into believing he wasn’t a little bit anxious. Sinking heavily into his armchair, Kenny switched the television on to Channel 9, and found himself distractedly watching a woman with glossy hair and red lips advertise Christmas hampers in a spacious, warmly lit kitchen. He changed to a game show on Prime.

“Welcome to Deal or No Deal... it’s great to have everyone here at the studio, and also those of you joining us from home... HELLO, hello, and welcome...”

Kenny mumbled ‘hello’ under his breath, felt the eager taste of the word, the way it rolled off the tongue.

When the doorbell finally rang, he switched the television off and leaped to his feet. Heart racing with excitement, he opened the front door a crack, poked his head out and cleared his throat.

“Good afternoon, Mr Martin!”
Kenny closed his eyes. It was Francis, who delivered Meals on Wheels. He breathed out, feeling annoyed at having unnecessarily exhausted his nerves. He’d been so preoccupied with Estelle’s visit he’d forgotten they delivered around this time today.

“How are you?” Francis began piling the Styrofoam dishes into Kenny’s arms. Kenny nodded. Francis was perhaps in his seventies, with white hair that reminded Kenny of a wisp of cloud on a fine day, and a kind if not reticent face. Occasionally on his rounds, he was accompanied by students volunteering for community service. Kenny recalled one nervous boy who had messed up his lines, had choked out “It’s Wheels on Meals!” before darting down the stairs, leaving the food on the doorstep.

“So we have two chicken pies, and one roast beef, to last the weekend.” Francis scribbled on his clipboard in pencil. Kenny glanced down at the dishes, thinking perhaps ‘Wheels on Meals’ was a more accurate description of the sad arrangement of chicken-mushroom pie and steamed vegetables lining the plate. “And don’t forget your Christmas pudding.”

Kenny thanked him, closed the door, and slid the pudding into the garbage bin before receding restlessly back into his armchair. He had begun receiving his meals a couple of years ago shortly after retirement as a librarian. Cooking had culminated in – not an exactly impossibility for him – but a source of potential hazard after one or two incidents entailing shrivelled spaghetti, second-degree burns to the hands, and a smoke alarm. He had never cooked much prior to his retirement anyway; had always eaten frugally at local restaurants where he was a regular. However, since the absence of working routine left Kenny with little cause for leaving his house except to dispose of the catalogues accumulating in his mailbox, his brief exchanges with Francis on the doorstep represented a significant fraction of his limited social contact.
Otherwise, Kenny regularly saw Estelle, who came once every week on Friday afternoons after school. Often they played cards, and ate Home Brand chocolate wafers biscuits or Arnott’s assorted creams – Kenny observed that she always picked the Monte Carlos out; they were her favourite, and he made sure to save them for her – without ever really saying much. Nonetheless, he spent every week looking forward to her company just for those couple of hours until she left again before dinner. Now, his eyes fell back on the clock in anticipation. It was 4.33 p.m. Half an hour had passed since she said she’d come.

The phone rang. Kenny froze in his seat, startled by the noise. He let it ring. The sound, urgent and shrill, bounced off the yellow and brown kitchen tiles, and reverberated through the narrow hallway between his bedroom and the foyer. Kenny stood up without picking it up, paralysed by a feeling of dread. The ringing seemed to last minutes, before a short silence preceded a sustained beep and the call went to voicemail.

“Hey Granddad, uh… yeah, it’s Estelle. I, um… I’m not coming this afternoon. Sorry. I’m feeling kind of sick after netball practice and stuff. I’m really sorry I didn’t call you sooner… I’ll see you next week… Anyway, bye!”

Her voice, loud and crackling through the receiver, filled the apartment. After she said goodbye, the room felt unnaturally quiet. She hadn’t come last week either, citing a lot of homework and notes to study for final examinations. Disappointment quickly dispelled the day’s hopes of seeing his granddaughter. Kenny lapsed back in his chair, suddenly noticing how blank the walls were, the way tiny fissures scarred the ceiling, and how orbs of dust had collected in the corners of the room over many years. Late afternoon sunlight, warm and sticky, spattered through the dirty windows, casting shadows which dappled the carpet in soft grey smears. Emptiness and old age seemed to permeate everything he saw. Kenny felt a chill; an ache in his throat; a numbing in his chest.

To fill the silence, he turned on the television again.
“... Want to be fit and toned in front of your friends this summer? The great thing about AB Glider Pro is that if you call right now, you can get this fantastic offer PLUS our Platinum Rowing Machine for FREE... that's right, for free. Dial trip—”

He switched it off.

“And I’m mad at her, because well, like... it’s a general rule, okay, that you don’t date your best friend’s ex-boyfriend.”

“Is it?”

“Yes!”

“According to what book?”

“According to – look, I know what I’m talking about, alright?”


“I did not! I texted him first; then I called him. Are you even on my side?”

Estelle raised her eyebrows at her friend. “What are you? Five? I don’t do playground politics.”

“I’m sorry. I just… you’re my best friend. I talk to you.”

Standing on the footpath in front of their high school, the two girls faced each other, shading their eyes with upturned hands. The bell signalling sixth period’s end had just rung, and the sun shone through the canopies formed by the tree-lined streets, illuminating the tips of their hair. Cool, blue shadows fell across the pale of their arms and legs, forming spiralling patterns on their skin as the branches lifted in a warm, singing breeze. The heat from their school bags pressing down against the backs of their school dresses made them sweat, and accentuated the scent of stale deodorant and perfume grazing their underarms and necks.

Estelle glanced up. She could feel summer, like every summer she remembered since she was
a child, languidly move through suburbia as the days passed and it became hotter – in the way
long violet shadows began seeping slowly over concrete paths, Sydney hummed and chugged
in the smoky heat, ice-creams and popsicles made your fingers sticky through their wrapping
– and the sky was a brilliant, cavernous blue that stretched seamlessly over the city.

Now that she was seventeen years old, every now and again Estelle got a little bit
choked up with nostalgia, often triggered by merely a sight or smell as the season changed, in
which she longed for the uncomplicated ways of childhood where one simply felt loved and
content without the need to question their place in some broader scheme of things. This
increasing self-awareness frequently translated in a feeling of alienation which passed
through her in the strangest of moments – while talking to a friend or riding the train home.
She wanted to tell Ingrid this, or ask her if she ever felt that same longing to go back to
primary school, but she wasn’t sure how.

“’Stelle?” Ingrid moved a hand in front of Estelle’s face. “Are you mad at me?”

“Huh? No, of course not… It’s fine. Look, don’t worry about it. You’ll be fine.
Caitlin’ll be fine. We’ll all be fine. Peter’s a douche. They’ll probably fight and break up by
the beginning of Year 12 next year and she’ll be all heartbroken and sorry and listening to
angsty music and you can pop your popcorn and enjoy the show.”

Ingrid blinked. “You’re so cynical.”

Statements like that terrified Estelle. She didn’t know what she was. Being cynical
was an act she tried on. Today she was tired of silly, theatrical teenage notions of what was
unfair and important and heartbreaking in life, spilling sarcasm like ink onto the blank canvas
of everyone else’s hopes. Tomorrow she was just like them, sending messages into
cyberspace seeking confirmation of her ordinary teenage existence in a reply surfacing on her
iPhone with a soft buzz. Other days, she could be something else entirely; the confidant, the
smart one, the sad one. The possibilities were endless. She didn’t know what she was.
“Anyway, are you coming with us to sing karaoke this afternoon?” Ingrid asked.

“We’re all going to hang out for a couple of hours now that assessment’s finished… um – me, Susie, Daniel, Jess… Peter and Caitlin might be there, actually. Will you please come?”

“I can’t. It’s Friday. I need to catch a bus to visit my grandfather in a few minutes anyway.”

“Don’t you visit him every Friday though? It’s just your grandfather. You can miss one week, can’t you?”

“I already didn’t go last week.”

“How come you visit him every week on Friday afternoons?”

Estelle sighed. “It’s like… when I started high school my mum started making me go. Because my grandparents are divorced and he lives all alone, and she’s busy but she thought it was important that he see somebody regularly and I always got along with Granddad, more than she does. I’d feel guilty. It’s just what I’ve always done. I always turn up at 4 o’clock on Fridays and we play cards and stuff.”

“Oh. Okay, I understand.”

“Sorry!”

“Don’t worry about it! Call me later tonight? I need to talk to somebody!”

“Yeah, okay!”

Estelle watched as Ingrid headed toward the bus stop, surprising herself by feeling disappointed. She pictured the group singing karaoke and having fun in her absence. All around her, teenagers were loping out of classrooms, being stopped by teachers for not wearing their hats, for wearing their skirts too short or charging across the grass. The whole school breathed of the sticky, papery scent of the end of the year; of final examinations and assemblies, of cleaning out lockers and Year 12 muck-up-day messes. There was an atmosphere of being glad to be alive, of being young and slightly invincible and ready for
long holidays and messing around. Estelle could feel it; the whim, the fancy. It took hold of her, too. Forgetting about her grandfather in that moment – with the justification that she would see him next week, anyway, and it would be just the same – she found herself racing after Ingrid. No, she wasn’t cynical at all.

“Wait! I’ve changed my mind! I’m coming!”

It was fine, he told himself, it was the end of the school year and things got busy and hectic and Estelle was growing up, doing things. She would certainly come next week.

Kenny stared into the blank television. He could see the outline of himself dimly reflected in its dark screen; the elderly, curved shape of his back, the vague indication of hair crowning his head like a halo. He was still breathing, but he was already long gone.

“Hello,” he whispered.

“You lonely old man,” said his reflection. Occasionally, it talked back to him.

“I know, I know.”

The truth was he had felt like a lonely old man for much of his life.

When he was twenty-one, Kenny returned from Vietnam. It was 1969, the year Apollo 11 landed on the moon and – while its testament to mankind’s greater capacity served to momentarily distract the rest of society from its shortcomings – the Martin family was subtly excused from cause for celebration. His arm in a sling, Kenny stiffened in his mother’s embrace. He stood in the foyer of his house as if viewing it for the first time. From the mantelpiece, a photograph of Kenny, six years old and encrusted in sand and ice-cream at the seaside, beamed up at the tall, stooped figure in army uniform. Kenny turned the photograph of himself away so that it faced the wall. Then he walked upstairs without a word.

Kenny Martin – who had fronted his team to victory with a football tucked under one arm, had brazenly kissed next door’s Fiona Baker on the floodlit playing field in front of
everybody; who woke the street up with Jimi Hendrix on Sunday mornings and drank all the milk in the refrigerator – retreated to his bedroom in abdication of his former self. He was twenty-one, but ever since then he felt as though he may as well have been two-hundred-and-one. He had lived more than one lifetime in the couple of years he served in Vietnam.

Kenny spent many nights since returning unable to sleep, caved in by posters of rock bands in his childhood bedroom which now felt incongruous, the faces of The Byrds and The Rolling Stones down at him with expressions that appeared jeering in the dark. Often he turned instead to stare outside his window at the hot and clear summer night. The moon, a waning gibbous, was embedded in the black sky like a pearl in its shell. When he was a kid, Kenny would pretend he was an astronaut. He would traipse through his backyard swathed in shiny tinfoil, and the garden was transformed into a marbled, white lunar surface upon which he explored its craters and far side, searching for extra-terrestrial life; searching along the borders of the backyard fence for anybody out there.

A product of the conscription lottery, it was with this same childlike nativity that Kenny left for Vietnam, with the anxious yet enthusiastic air of someone embarking on an adventure.

The only person nineteen-year-old Kenny had known, who came closest to experiencing war was old Jack Collins, who lived next door to him and whose lawn Kenny mowed for pocket money. Jack told him how, as soon as he was old enough, he joined the air force. "We were waiting up in Darwin, all ready to go to Borneo," he’d said. "But then the Yanks dropped the bombs on the Japs, and before I knew it I was back on the farm in Wagga."

"Ha, ha… the Yanks," Kenny mumbled with a smile.

"Oh you know the Americans; the Yanks... weren't very clever. Now, McArthur reckoned that troops were indispensable, but I don't agree with that. The Yanks were in the
plentiful, but us Australians just had to make do with what we got, which wasn't much, and that made us savvy, ya know? We'd plan things, not like the Yanks who’d just rush into it.”

Kenny grinned.

Later that month, at the end-of-year school dance, he confessed to Fiona Baker that he was in love with her.

Stars hung from the gym ceiling above them in a gleaming, surreal constellation made from cardboard, while they danced to *I’m a Believer* by The Monkees which came out that year, until they were flushed and breathless and theirs eyes sparkled. During the final song, they slow danced to a long romantic ballad, and Fiona buried her face in his neck.

“Why do you have to go next year?” she whispered.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “I promise.”

“You could die, you know,” Fiona murmured into his shoulder. She was choking up, he could tell.

They stopped dancing. Kenny lifted her chin up so she faced him, and stared into her eyes. They were deep blue, like miniature Blue Marbles. They spoke of whole worlds to be explored, and in that moment Kenny loved her so hard. He couldn’t let her go. He wanted to spend the rest of his life loving her. Wiping away a single tear which had stained her cheek, he gave her that reassuring, boyish smile which she always fell for. “I’ll be fine, you know I will,” he repeated. He truly believed he would be too. It was within his youthful nature to be optimistic, to feel a little unassailable. “You’re beautiful,” he told Fiona, brushing his lips against her forehead and pressing her into his chest.

“Kenny…”

“Will you wait for me?”

“I don’t know....”
But she did wait for him, and Kenny did not die. Nevertheless, he saw enough of his mates die. He returned to suburban Sydney, his skin brown and craggy from days spent under the burning Asian sun; his eyes worn and vacant, haunted by memories of the wounded being carried away on stretchers while troops clambered through thickets of jungle, angry, green tendrils snagging at his legs and dragging him down into the mud; of death traps and rashes and explosions and shrapnel and blood saturated dressings and torn limbs. The helicopters carrying the cadavers sliced the sky with their rotors while the pink, flesh-coloured clouds at dusk waned upon the coming night of restless dreams. Well, he knew what savvy was because he had really been there. He heard the sounds even now, over forty years later.

Kenny fulfilled his promise of marrying Fiona the year he came back, but the man she married was no longer invincible or harbouring dreams of exploring worlds. He was quiet and severe, preparing himself for a lifetime of seeing the world safely through the pages of library books; of nightmares and wild, uncontrollable panic at the sound of helicopters. Kenny pushed Fiona away from him, and the shutting out hurt her. She was so good, he knew that; she was kind and patient, but after fifteen years it became apparent to both he and Fiona that old youthful impulses were not enough to save them from the real world.

“Love was out to get to me; that’s the way it seems... Disappointment haunted all my dreams...”

Estelle sunk into the settee in the karaoke lounge, vaguely breathless after having participated to what she felt was her maximum capacity, and proceeded to watch everyone else sing and pump their fists in the air in time to the music. The karaoke place was owned by a group of young Koreans, and the list of songs posted on the walls of the room was written in Korean with English translations. Estelle’s eyes followed the coloured lights as they swivelled around the dark room. She watched, intrigued, as Caitlin and Ingrid sung
energetically albeit badly into their microphones, and everybody else clapped along, shimmying as yellow, red and green lights swirled across their faces.

It was strange to think, the sorts of things people did to amuse themselves. Not just karaoke, Estelle thought, but what about people who went to circuses to watch performers stick flames down their throats, or run around the rink wearing sparkling clothes and taming giant, man-eating cats? Humans were odd, she thought.

“And then I saw her face…”

The song was *I'm a Believer* by Smash Mouth. Estelle watched as Caitlin and Ingrid shared a microphone, swinging their arms as they sang. She could sense the tension between them, in the way that Ingrid kept glancing at Caitlin with narrowed eyes and Caitlin pretended not to notice, pulling the microphone closer toward her.

“Now I'm a believer…”

Estelle looked up as Peter came to sit beside her, wiping the sweat from his brow and putting his microphone on the table. He ran a hand through his curly hair, and grinned at her.

“Hey there!”

“Hey.”

“This is fun yeah?”

Was it fun? Estelle supposed it was. “I guess… I’m kind of beat though. My mouth is dry and I think I’ve lost my voice… I wish I could sing.”

“Yeah, me too.”

That was a stupid thing to say. Peter *could* sing. He was in the motet choir. There was a silence. Estelle watched him scratch his head, and wince.

“Um… do you want to go get drinks? There’s a Maccas just near here, I think.”

Estelle hesitated. “Yeah, okay.”

“I'm in love, oh... I’m a believer; I couldn’t leave her if I tried...”
Peter yelled that they would be back before pushing the door open with one arm, which Estelle ducked under, and they went into the street. It was getting later in the afternoon now, and the square swarmed with people returning home, doing Christmas shopping or going out for dinner. The air was hot and thick with the aroma of pork and spices coming from restaurants mingled with the muggy, sweet scent of grocery stores. The smell of car petroleum, sewers and hundreds of people packed into a single space created an unpleasant undercurrent.

“So, since when have you been going out with Caitlin?”

“Since last week. She sent me a message telling me she really likes me.”

“Ha.”

“You must think I’m a real jerk.”

“Nah, not really.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, kind of.”

Estelle had heard Peter referred to by a variety of obnoxious names by Ingrid, typically which alluded to his slithering, greasy nature, and her image of him was therefore automatically biased. Nonetheless, from their own conversations she didn’t particularly mind him; he could be funny and honest. They crossed the street into MacDonalds and stood in line.

“She won’t kiss me though,” said Peter.

“Really?”

“No.” He looked very stricken about this. “Every time I lean in, she pushes me away. It’s weird… she says she really likes me though.”

“Maybe she just needs time to get used to being around you. It’s only been a week.”

“That’s a fair point.”
They sat outside on a bench to drink their Cokes instead of returning straight to the karaoke lounge. Estelle pushed the toe of her school shoe over a cigarette butt and rolled it around, while gazing pensively at all the pigeons as they flocked together around morsels of bread just thrown out into the street by the bakery. The ground beneath them was scabby with pigeon shit.

“You’re really quiet,” said Peter.

“What?”

“You’re quiet. You never say anything in classes. You just sit there and notice things.”

“Um. Thanks?”

“It’s not a bad thing… It’s… I think it’s cool.”

Estelle looked up at him, hating herself for feeling flattered by this half-hearted compliment. Nonetheless, compliments were frugally exchanged among her friends; no one had told her this before. She was the quiet one, and it could be a desirable thing. He grinned at her, as if sanctioning the validity of what he’d just said, as if she should be flattered by him. Then, something passed between them – his face tilted to one side, and he grasped her by the shoulders while she lifted her head – and by some unspoken, mutual decision they found themselves kissing.

Her eyes widened, and she pulled away first. She stood up. “Shit.” She lifted a hand to her mouth. “What did we just do?”

He grinned at her. “Relax, it’s fine!”

“What the fuck? No it’s not! What about Caitlin?” She thought of Ingrid and felt sick. This was betrayal; this was terribly, horribly wrong.

He looked at her distractedly. “What? No one saw.”

“You’re kidding me.”
“No.”

“That was my first kiss,” she said hotly. She stared at him, noticing the faint suggestion of stubble on his face, his dark eyelashes, the acne marring his hairline; the way he was tall and broad and no longer the seven-year-old chasing her across the playground, back when they were all giddy and intersex and strawberry milk still tasted good. “Don’t you…” Her voice came out splintered. She looked at him desperately, crestfallen. “Don’t you miss being a kid sometimes? Don’t you feel scared and fake and alone?”

“What are you talking about?”

The feeling of wanting to cry lurched through her chest. Her cheeks were warm with mortification, and she felt tears springing to her eyes. Before she could cry in front of him, she darted across the road, pushing through the crowds of people until she was back at the karaoke place. She thundered up the stairs, and poked her head into the room where everyone was still singing.

“You make me feel like I’m living a teenage dream…”

“Hey guys!” she yelled over the music, trying to appear normal. “I’m going home now!”

Ingrid looked up. “Don’t forget to call me tonight!”

Estelle left before she could reassure her friend that she would not forget.

“… So take a chance and don’t ever look back, don’t ever look back.”

Kenny was riding the train into the city with a flat cap balanced on his head, his gnarled fingers curled over the top of his walking cane which was planted firmly between his legs. It must have been a little more than over a year since he had last taken the train anywhere, or even properly left his apartment for that matter. It was as if he had forgotten how he was supposed to act. Now, he sat apprehensively next to a young man wearing a pin-striped suit
and sneakers listening to his iPod, wondering if this was a terrible idea, and whether perhaps he should just go back home again once the train reached the station. He wasn’t sure exactly where he was going, but he thought maybe he would stroll through a department store, and be surrounded by people. He wanted to see anything but blank walls.

He stared anxiously out the window, as the train chugged past a suburb of old bungalow houses, painted pastel pinks and mint greens and studded with Christmas lights like braces on teeth. On the horizon, one could see all the business buildings and factories divided by roads and telephone lines and green patches of park, reminding Kenny of a computer motherboard the one time he had ever seen one, when his daughter had pulled his computer apart in order to update its parts.

It was strange, he thought, how big the world sometimes felt, even though in reality it was quite small. He recalled one time when he had been wandering aimlessly through a department store in the television section, the year he came back from Vietnam. He had just raced into the shopping mall, heart striking against his ribcage, in order to avoid a group of protestors promenading through the city square. They were young men and women wrapped in scarves and carrying anti-war signs under their arms reading END THE WAR IN VIETNAM NOW and AUSTRALIA DOESN’T WANT WARMONGERS in fat black letters, and Kenny panicked when he saw them. Fiona had called after him, clutching onto his arm desperately, but he had shaken himself from her grasp and strode away morosely. He still remembered the sad, helpless look in her eyes, the red of her lipstick staining the corners of her mouth and the way her strawberry blonde hair fell across her face in the breeze, as he brushed her away.

In the department store, he passed through dozens of television sets. Couples holding hands were inspecting them, measuring their widths and listening attentively to the store
assistants. Each television was repeating crackling footage of Neil Armstrong planting the American flag into the moon’s surface.

“One small step for man... one giant leap for mankind.”

Kenny dreamily passed through the aisles of television sets, and it was one of those few moments in his life he thought he felt okay. The television flickered to an image taken by Apollo 11 of the Blue Marble, and Kenny thought of how all of humanity’s wars had occurred beneath the wisp of clouds on that small globe floating in the middle of nowhere in the universe. All the people who had loved and fought one another had passed across its surface, and Kenny was comforted by that.

Estelle didn’t go home. She could still feel Peter’s teeth grazed against hers, the sour-sweet flavour of Coke coating the walls of her throat. She texted her mother saying she would be at her grandfather’s a little late today, and caught a bus to a large shopping mall, where she wandered around for a while, wanting to feel small and insignificant and lose herself. Massive Christmas wreaths with gleaming silver baubles in the shape of stars hung from the ceilings. It was that time of year, as they say. Hundreds of people filed in and out of shops whose windows were sashed with bargains, carrying bags labelled with brands that shouted at you in loud slogans.

Estelle watched a girl called Aimee Patterson who she knew from the year above her, pulling down the door of a small tea store where she worked. It made a shuddering sound until it touched the floor. Estelle simply stared at her from a distance until she disappeared. It was late afternoon, and office workers who had just finished up were striding through the centre together in groups, laughing or frowning tiredly, the women’s heels making sophisticated clacking noises against the tiles. A mother in a floral dress pushing a
perambulator passed her. So did a bare-footed, bearded man whose brown arms were coated in a jungle of tattoos. He was muttering under his breath, his eyes darting around madly.

This was the real world, thought Estelle grimly. There was that abstract phrase which summarised her future again, often employed by her mother when Estelle was being immature. “What will you do one day when you’re living in the real world, Es?” she would say if Estelle complained about something trivial. The real world was where adults woke up in the morning and earned money and had families and tried very hard not to break them by being responsible and confident and emotionally intelligent, riding the escalators up Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. She had learned that in her English class when they were studying advertising, examining the way ads appealed to one’s ability to self-actualise. The real world was where notions of heartbreaking and unfair encompassed bigger things than your first kiss, and how you felt awkward and stupid in front of people because you just hadn’t the faintest clue how to act sometimes.

She sighed. Many of the shops were closing now, but the cinema was still open. She drifted into the foyer and stared up at the posters of the movies on display. Then she noticed that the entrance was left unattended. Her heart missed a beat. She felt an urge. It planted itself like a tiny seed in her abdomen, and shot through her chest where it flowered, its tendrils clutching onto her lungs. She knew what she was going to do. Glancing around to make sure no one could see, Estelle strode into the cinema and ducked into the first room on her right.

It was empty, and appeared to be showing a teen romance or a coming-of-age flick. Estelle took a seat in the centre.

A close-up showed an attractive blonde trying to convince his love interest that he loved her or something. They were sitting in a rowboat under the moonlight.

“I love you… how many times do I have to say it? I love you!”
The love interest looked away from him.

Before it got cringe worthy, Estelle snapped, “This isn’t realistic!”

The actor glared at her. “Are you saying I’m a bad actor?” Occasionally, the actors in the film talked back to her.

“Maybe I am. Maybe it’s a terrible script.”

“Get out. We’re sharing a private moment, can’t you see?”

Estelle stood up and left the cinema. As she rode the escalator down to the bottom floor, she wished she had visited her grandfather instead. The afternoon had drained her. An old couple were standing behind her. She looked at them, thinking of the time when she was eleven and she had gone to see this period drama about the English romantic poet, John Keats, when suddenly a group of elderly women entered. It was as though they were taking an excursion from their nursing home. They filled the cinema with their mothball-talcum powdery scent and their wrinkles and canes and stockinged feet. By the end of the movie they were all weeping, dabbing at their eyes with handkerchiefs. Estelle didn’t understand what the fuss was about.

She wondered what love was, and what happened to people when they grew up. She thought of her grandparents. Her grandmother, Fiona, lived in Queensland and she only got to see her on holidays and during Christmas and New Year’s. She had a second husband, Estelle’s step-grandfather, and Estelle always liked visiting their house because the walls were like a great patchwork quilt of Fiona’s life, with photographs of places she’d been and things she’d done covering every inch of the wall. She was always smiling and laughing. Estelle’s granddad was the opposite, living all alone in his little flat without anything on his walls.

Estelle had asked her mother what happened, and she said that Granddad and Gran had married when they were really young and when he came back from Vietnam he suffered
badly from PTSD. It was sad for him, but he was difficult to live with at times and Gran made the decision to leave in the end. Although she felt sorry for her father, Estelle’s mother found him hard to get along with too; he was a very silent man. He never spoke about his time in Vietnam, and everyone learned not to ask questions.

Estelle always thought privately how terribly lonely that must be. She remembered how her Granddad would take her to this one park in the evenings when she was really little and, perched up on his shoulders, point out the moon to her and tell her about the olden days when the first man landed there.

“Is there anybody out there?” she would ask.

“Where?”

“On the moon! In outer-space!”

“I don’t know, I don’t know… is there anybody out there?” It would be one of the few times they actually spoke.

Kenny’s favourite park was on a hill, and that’s where he found himself after leaving the train station. The branches of willow trees dipped in a small pond, stirring the waters, and one could smell the grass, crisp and wavering, against the crepuscular sky. He moved around, slowly, when he saw a familiar figure at the entrance.

He squinted. Was it Estelle? It couldn’t be. Suddenly, the figure stopped, as if noticing him too.

Kenny fished out an old, lengthy Woolies receipt from his wallet (from when he had purchased his last supply of Arnott’s assorted creams), and using a texta from Estelle’s battered pencil case, scribbled on the blank side, ‘Hello, is there anybody out there?’ Then Estelle folded the receipt into a small paper airplane, and aimed it at the sky. They watched it
ascend upwards, defying the laws of gravity until it was swallowed by the night. Eventually it passed through the layers of the atmosphere, soaring into Outer Space where satellites and space probes were circling the black signalling for extra-terrestrial life.

Together, Kenny sat with his granddaughter on a bench watching the sunset daub the sky with pink and orange clouds. Finally, the day graduated into a starless night, with the exception of Venus winking stubbornly through the polluted sky. This would otherwise have been a disappointing sight, except that Sydney’s suburbs were a complex map of manmade constellations; a metropolitan sprawl of silvery streetlight for the eyes to momentarily swoon over in absence of the Milky Way.
The Raven
Dupin’s Final Case
No. 33, rue Dunot, Faubourg St. Germain, Paris 1889

Dear Reader,

If you are reading these words, you hold in your hands my chronicle of events that pertain to a very painful and difficult time in my life – the death of Edgar Allan Poe. I have been silent on this matter for fifty years. It has not been an easy silence. In all this time, I have not spoken of my great and dear friend, the famous amateur detective Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin’s unraveling of the mysterious demise of our colleague Edgar Allan Poe. Why you ask? Why not tell the world and end an enigma that has enthralled it since 1849? My reticence, dear Reader, in part is due to my respect of the genius of Poe but more importantly, I wish to protect the man himself. Poe was flawed, but he was also a man of great goodness. Poe died tragically because of the sinfulness of others whose envy and jealousy knew no bounds. I am nearing the end of my time on earth and the events of 1849 lie heavily on my soul. My dear companion Dupin has abjured me to write and then secrete this journal. Our world is not ready for the truth. Thus, I have consigned this chronicle to the dark until it is found in some future time that will view our actions and events with greater understanding and compassion than is possible in 1889.

Nathaniel Jacobs Esquire
Alone (1830)

From childhood's hour I have not been
   As others were; I have not seen
   As others saw; I could not bring
My passions from a common spring.
From the same source I have not taken
   My sorrow; I could not awaken
   My heart to joy at the same tone;
   And all I loved, I loved alone.
Then- in my childhood, in the dawn
   Of a most stormy life- was drawn
   From every depth of good and ill
   The mystery which binds me still:
   From the torrent, or the fountain,
   From the red cliff of the mountain,
   From the sun that round me rolled
   In its autumn tint of gold,
   From the lightning in the sky
   As it passed me flying by,
   From the thunder and the storm,
   And the cloud that took the form
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)
   Of a demon in my view.

Edgar Allan Poe
Poe’s *Tales; The Raven and Other Poems*
Chapter 1 Paris 1889

“The mystery that binds me still” (E.A. Poe, Alone)

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
"'Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door-
Only this, and nothing more."

The Raven by Edgar Allan Poe (1845)

Parisian autumnal winds rap eerily at the shuttered window sashes, startling me from my reverie. Poe’s words stare reproachfully from the leaves of my treasured rare volume, Tales; The Raven and Other Poems, 1845 inscribed by the genius' own hand. The day is dark and ponderous and so are my thoughts.

Dupin sits with pipe in hand, perusing the papers, musing in silence. A compact man, fine of figure, handsome with a noble brow, haughty and military in bearing, voice deeply timbered, but rising to a musical tenor when roused to exhibit his intellect. Generally indolent unless in the passions of observation, logic and imagination, Dupin is content to meditate daily in our little black library, au troisieme, at No. 33, rue Dunot, Faubourg St. Germain.

Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin’s antecedents have been related in previous tales and it will suffice here to sketch a brief introduction. He is younger than I by some few years. We are now entering the twilight of our lives – for us four score years have come and gone - but well I remember our initial encounter. We first met in Paris during one of my sojourns in 1830. He is a gentleman from an illustrious family who had been reduced to poverty by misfortunes not of his own making. I am a gentleman émigré from the Americas. Dupin bears the title of Chevalier, Knight of the Legion d’honneur. We share a passion for rare
C. Auguste Dupin as a young gentleman  (*original drawing by the author*)
books, rectitude, contemplation and seclusion. We reside in perfect agreement conversing, reading and writing, withdrawn from friends and family. Some think us mad, many think us odd. We are neither.

In the first light of the morning, as has ever been our practice, the massy shutters of our grotesque mansion are closed. Tapers flicker fitfully and we sit in perfect privacy. The lamps remain unlit, and eddies of smoke from our pipes form fanciful figures in the shadowed corners of the apartment. We will, as is our want and habit, sally forth when true darkness descends seeking, amid the wild lights and shadows of the populous city at night, that infinity of mental excitement that quiet observation can afford. Meanwhile, my gaze returns to considering the lines of Edgar Allan Poe’s most famous poem penned over fifty years ago, a work of genius that gave him the appellation ‘The Raven’.

Dupin interrupts my reverie, astonishing me as ever with his perspicacity.

“The tale could not and cannot be told to the present world, dear ami, even though long years have passed. Set down your account by all means, but then consign it to the fire. Nothing good will come of it. We know the truth. That must suffice. Or, if you must, write your words for posterity – for a future far hence that may appreciate your tale and its unpalatable truthfulness.”

I have long marveled at the brilliance of my friend that you have no doubt witnessed in the articles Murder at the Rue Morgue, The Mystery of Marie Roget and The Purloined Letter. His acuity in following my thoughts at this particular moment will thus not amaze. Dupin is correct as always. Dear Reader, I must write of those momentous days, long since passed as ‘From a proud tower in the town, Death looks gigantically down’ as Poe said. Mayhap in the telling, Poe’s shade
will rest and my soul shall find surcease.

I shall call my tale The Raven: Dupin's Final Case.

The Narrator as a young gentleman (original drawing by the author)
Chapter 2
“From childhood’s hour I have not been as others were” (E.A. Poe, Alone)

I first met Edgar Allan Poe at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville in the year 1826, when I was myself seventeen summers old. Although not intimate, the natural course of events and my passion for observation provided ample opportunity for me to know Poe. Many years hence we were to renew our association in very different circumstances.

I note that much has been written in the intervening years since Poe’s demise, and a great deal of it is fabrication. The infamy of Rufus W. Griswold’s (Ludwig) Obituary and Memoir of the Author has done incalculable damage here on the continent, in England and in the Americas. Griswold is motivated, I contend, by those base emotions of jealously and envy that ever hound true genius.

Poe was a man of pleasing appearance. He was thin, compact yet well proportioned and muscular. He was about five foot eight inches in height but his erect, military carriage made him appear taller. He had a keen visage. His partially curling, almost black hair was thrown back from his broad forehead in the student style. Those who knew Poe (both friends and foe) and who embraced phrenology made much of the vaulted nature of Poe’s brow as a necessity in housing his towering intellect and imagination. Poe was, in my opinion, rather more distinguished than handsome.

When I met him – he was seventeen - Poe favoured long sideburns and had no moustache. He grew it later as I recall, in 1845. For further elucidation on Poe’s appearance I refer you to the poetess Mrs. Sarah Helen Whitman who was once
Poe’s affianced and ever his advocate, avowal that S.W Hartshorn’s 1848 daguerreotype was “the best likeness Poe ever had.”
Mr. Allan courtesy of The Poe Society of Baltimore
Dear Reader, I ask your forbearance while I briefly regale you with the rudimentary facts of Poe’s early life as a way of redressing the falsehoods that continue to circulate, and by way of convincing you of the truth of my tale.

In the year 1826 Poe studied, as did I, classes in the Schools of Ancient and Modern languages. His contemporaries judged Poe talented and he was generally well liked. Academically Poe excelled. His recitations and regaling of tales, even at the youthful age of seventeen, riveted his classmates who regularly gathered in Room Thirteen, West Range. Even his greatest detractors acknowledge the beauty and majesty of Poe’s voice. It was mellow, melodious and more flexible than powerful; a voice remarkable in the peculiarity of its intonation.

Poe’s lot at school was not an easy one. The students were unruly and mayhem governed. Poe had little to live on because of the spiteful penury his wealthy foster father, the tobacconist Mr. Allan, thrust upon him. Consequently, Poe was forced to borrow from Charlottesville merchants and then to gamble to recoup his borrowings, only to find himself in greater debt. Ever the southern gentleman, Poe felt the dishonor of unresolved debts deeply. This necessitated him leaving university.

I heard later through mutual acquaintances that he worked for a short while for Mr. Allan. But after a disappointment in love Poe enrolled in the army. He distinguished himself achieving the rank of sergeant major and received an honourable discharge. At this time there was a softening of Mr. Allan’s shunning of Poe, represented by Mr. Allan’s assistance in Poe entering West Point. Alas, Mr. Allan’s antipathy is attested to by the wealthy merchant’s will that left nothing
to Poe, consigning him to the abject poverty. I believe this is when Poe decided
to be the first American gentleman to make his living from writing...

Virgina Poe (nee Clemm) courtesy of The Poe Society of Baltimore
Dear Reader, here I pause in my narrative. The wind has risen to a stormy crescendo, rain batters our ancient abode. Perhaps the elements hear the turmoil of my thoughts. Dupin rises to light more oil lamps; he has ever rejected gas lamps. He maintains that the gas fumes poison the air. Dupin’s movements are careful and deliberate as befits his age, but still determined. He resumes his seat and continues his contemplation in silence. I bow my head in concentration and resume my scribbling.
I was not to reacquaint myself with Poe in a personal capacity for some years. However, correspondence from friends and family and journals from my homeland kept me cognizant of aspects of Poe’s life. He married his youthful cousin Virginia Clemm and settled into domesticity with her and her mother, his aunt Maria Clemm. Poe’s literary brilliance dazzled, his blistering criticisms shocked and his personality polarized polite and literary society alike. Despite the drama that surrounded Poe, if you had told me that this rapprochement would eventually lead Dupin and myself to investigate Poe’s mysterious and untimely death, I would have called you a madman.

At this juncture I pause in my writing, rise and procure my journals for the years 1840 -1850. Clasped within the bindings are several publications including The Gifts for 1845 published December 1844. Ah! The Poe – Osgood – Ellet scandal! Painful memories. I will write of them soon, but not yet. I must be methodical in my narration, as meticulous and precise as my companion Dupin in solving mysteries.

It was the year 1840 that marked Poe and my reacquaintance. At that time Poe was writing for Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine. He was also engaged in challenging his readers with deciphering encryptions. In those days there was a steamship mail delivery service between New York and Bremen bi-monthly that brought newspapers, magazines and mail from America and kept us abreast of events.

Poe’s intellect rivaled Dupin’s. Many hours of entertainment were afforded Dupin
and I perusing journals from my homeland and pitting our wits against Poe, I failing to solve the riddles and Dupin deciphering them. It was not, however, cryptography but the affair of the Julius Rodman expedition that occasioned correspondence and collaboration between the two geniuses.

In 1840 Poe published accounts of explorer Julius Rodman’s momentous feat of being the first white man to cross the Rocky Mountains. I extolled volubly the magnitude of Rodman’s accomplishment, but Dupin’s only enigmatically commented, “The riddle is so far riddled”. His voice had that intonation which is commonly employed in speaking to some one at great distance. This state signaled Dupin’s absorption in unravelling a mystery. Dupin took up paper and ink and penned a communiqué to Poe. I was much astonished to read it before it was dispatched. Some months later it was revealed that Dupin was correct. The Rodman Journal was a fake written by Poe, it was the first of Poe’s infamous hoaxes. The acumen of Dupin had realised it instantaneously while the rest of the world was duped until Poe enlightened them.

The Rodman hoax was the catalyst for the correspondence between my companion and my former classmate. It blossomed because of a shared passion for enigmas and a fascination with the darker deeds of humanity. Their association solved many mysteries. Dupin and Poe would peruse journalist accounts, letters and other documents pertaining to interesting criminal cases. Dupin would inform Poe in regular missives of his method of ratiocination; it was Poe who coined the expression but Dupin who perfected the process. Poe’s and Dupin’s liaison was born of mutual recognition and respect for genius and I was honoured to witness it.
Dear Reader, here ends the singular circumstance of the commencement of correspondence between Edgar Allan Poe in America, the famous amateur detective Dupin and myself in Paris in 1840. It was an association that changed the literary world and eventually, it was to lead to Dupin’s final investigation.
Chapter 4
“From the Lightning in the Sky” (E.A. Poe, Alone)

The civilized world now knows of Poe and his genius but it was not always so. It was in 1841 that Poe published *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, a seminal work greatly admired. What the literary world does not know is that this was the first in a series of collaborations with the brilliant deductive nonpareil detective, Dupin – my friend and confidante.

The meeting of two titanic minds - Poe and Dupin – and their charting of recesses of thought altogether inaccessible to mere mortals like myself, resulted in the birth of three famous articles of brilliance: *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Mystery of Marie Roget* and *The Purloined Letter*. The coadjutors collaborated on genuine events, albeit with a degree of dissembling deemed necessary to preserve Dupin’s requisite of anonymity.

In the case of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, Poe employed his faculties of reason and imagination, I can only speculate on the haunted chambers of the poet’s own mind and the strange experiences of his inner life and invented the Orangutan. In reality, Dupin solved the brutal slayings of two female personages in Paris in 1840 but such was the vaulted position of the assassin that concealment was the only recourse. If you doubt the veracity of my avowals, I need only remind the reader of the reality of the Mary Rogers’ abominable murder, fictionalised by Poe in *The Mystery of Marie Roget*. This article almost destroyed the alliance between Poe and Dupin and is inextricably linked to Poe’s baffling disappearance and death in 1849. It is also the raison d’état for this account. The latter I will examine with greater scrutiny ‘ere I conclude my tale. Of the third short story I will only venture that personages of rank in Paris will not be
surprised to learn of the authenticity, not withstanding literary liberalities, related in *The Purloined Letter*.

The cover of this almanac bears an illustration of the murder of Mary Rogers. Known as the "Beautiful Cigar Girl," Miss Rogers was a popular hostess at Anderson's Tobacco Emporium in New York in the late 1830s. She was found brutally murdered in 1841, and Poe published his own solution to the still-unsolved mystery as his 1842 short story *The Mystery of Marie Roget*.  

*Courtesy of The Poe Society of Baltimore*
The clandestine nature of the Poe - Dupin relationship was judged a necessity and only Dupin, Poe and myself were ever party to the ruse. The Chevalier and I preferred our own company, venturing forth only at night to observe the foibles of humanity. Poe too reveled in secrecy as attested to by his use of pseudonyms. As early as 1827 Poe assumed the cognomen Edgar A. Perry on his enlistment in the army; Quarles was used for The Raven, and his final letters were signed E. S. T. Grey - created from his first name (Edgar) and the first letters of his favourite authors, Shakespeare and Tennyson.
There is a gentleman, rather the worse for wear, at Ryan's Fourth Ward Polls — and who appears in great distress and he says he is acquainted with you, and I assure you, he is in need of immediate assistance.

Joseph Walker's note
Chapter 5
“From every depth of good and ill” (E.A. Poe, Alone)
1849

The shocking news of Edgar Allan Poe’s death reached Dupin and myself within days of his decease. It occasioned a response from my colleague that I have hitherto rarely witnessed. Indolence was replaced by action and within a fortnight we sailed from the port of Bremen to Baltimore on the Morsel with the North German Lloyd Steamship Company. My tentative query regarding the cause of the unprecedented haste in which we had left France elicited the following reply from Dupin.

“There is a mystery here that requires my immediate attention. Monsieur Poe’s death is a tragedy. The world has been deprived of a genius. I have lost an égalité intellectuelle. It should not have happened! I failed to predict it. I was too absorbed by personal grief. I must go to Baltimore. I must see this Gunner’s Hall where he was found in desperate circumstance; ailing, alone, delirious, dressed in poor man’s attire. I must know where Monsieur Poe was in the days before his death. No account has ascertained his movements from the 27th of September until the 3rd of October. It was Monsieur Joseph Walker who chanced upon him and sent for Docteur Snodgrass with this desperate note recorded in the Baltimore Sun that I have here in my hands.

Dupin’s mind teemed with questions that he had me record. Dear Reader, I have included them here for your edification. Un. Why was Monsieur Poe in Baltimore? He was supposed to be in Philadelphia. Deux. Why did he take his friend Monsieur Carter’s sword cane and not his own with him when he left for Sadler’s restaurant, the last place he was seen before his disappearance? Trois. Why did
Monsieur Poe not take his travelling trunk with his most valued possessions - manuscripts, lecture notes and literary works - instead of leaving it at the Swan Hotel in Richmond? Quatre. Why is it assumed that his death was an accident caused by alcohol yet Docteur Moran could detect no hint of liquor upon his breath? Cinq. What role, dear companion, does femelle jealousy play? Sixième. Who is this ‘Reynolds’ that Monsieur Poe shouted vis-à-vis in his dying last days? Enfin, Most importantly, what has the murder of Marie Roget, alias Mary Rogers, to do with this mysterious matter?"

Here Dupin, whom I had never seen so excitable, paused before continuing in his speculations. I paused in my writing.

“Interestingly, Monsieur Poe,” continued Dupin, “was found on election night, a time infamous for the infamous practice of Cooping”

Dear Reader, Cooping, if you are unaware of this infamous term, is the illegal but prolific practice of kidnapping men, plying them with alcohol and laudanum and forcing them to vote at different polling booths.

“Dear John,” Dupin surprised me by declaring, “we must solve this mystery. We must travel to your homeland, to America. It is our duty to Monsieur Poe. It will be our final case.”
Chapter 6
“Of a most stormy life” (E.A. Poe, Alone)

Dear Reader, the voyage to America lasted seventeen days. We disembarked at Baltimore and journeyed to our new domicile that would be our main residence for the duration of our stay in America.

We lodged at the elegant Carrollton Hotel, Jonestown in the vicinity of Little Italy.

During the course of the first morning, Dupin and I wrote several communiqués, including letters of introduction to those of society in Baltimore, Richmond and New York that would assure us access to those who were intimate with Poe and those otherwise relevant to the case of Poe’s demise.

At luncheon Dupin received a box of letters he had requested from Poe’s mother-aunt, Mrs. Maria Clemm, prior to leaving France. They were copies of Poe’s correspondence. During the course of the day police records, witness statements and other documents arrived to aid our investigation; such was the fame of Dupin.

Dupin’s methodology in unraveling mysteries is novel. His singular approach of entering into a rigorous analysis of the event by examining each point, the opinions and arguments of the press on the subject. Dupin applied reason as his first principle of investigation.

Dupin daily regaled me with the salient points of the case.

“We must consider,” said Dupin, “the events of the months prior to the death of Monsieur Poe in order to understand his final days, which have proved an unfathomable mystery to those of less acute intellect. Prior to his demise, Monsieur Poe had been the victim of a vindictive vengeance that had
beleaguered him for some considerable time. In fact

Frances Osgood  *courtesy of The Poe Society of Baltimore*
since 1845. I refer you, Cher ami, to the poem published in the *Broadway Journal*, January 2nd of that year by friends of a Madame Ellet.

“In 1845,” Dupin explained, “Monsieur Poe was the editor and part owner of the *Broadway Journal*. Madame Frances (Fanny) Osgood, a member of the New York literati and celebrated beauty, embarked on a literary courtship of Monsieur Poe. She published poems and romantic short stories publically wooing the married poet. This occasioned scandal. Poe, a faithful friend to Madame Osgood, was innocent of wrongdoing. It is at this time that another literary lady and rival, Madame Elizabeth Ellet, attempted to court Poe by professing her *amour* in the *Broadway Journal*. The poet chivalrously but gently rebuffed her advances. But Madame Ellet pursued Poe, sending the poet’s ailing wife Virginia poison-pen letters.”

“Outrageous!” I interjected as I read a letter of Poe’s on the scandal.

Dupin nodded as he lit his Meacham pipe. “Poe rebuked her fervidly and the situation became inflamed. Hence, *dear collègue*, Madame Ellet’s vendetta against Poe set in motion a series of events which I fear led to Poe’s death.”
To trust in friends is but so so,
Especially when cash is low;
The Broadway Journal’s proved ‘no go’
Friends would not pay the pen of Poe.

Defamatory note in the *Broadway Journal* regarding Poe by Mrs. Ellet

“In the name of God, what else had I to anticipate in return
for the offense which I offered to Mrs. Ellet’s insane vanity
and self-esteem, that she should spend the rest of her days in
ransacking the world for scandal…” “It is true,” he
continued, “that ‘Hell has no fury like a woman scorned’… I
 scorned Mrs. Ellet simply because she revolted me.”

Letter from Poe regarding Mrs. Ellet
EXOTICA
CHAPTER 1

My parents always warned me about hitch hiking. They’d tell me about how dangerous it was and how I could be picked up by anyone, a stranger, an axe murderer et cetera, et cetera, blah, blah, blah. I had listened to them at the time of course, but now, why should I?

~

My arm was starting to cramp. I’d held it out for over an hour and I’d had no luck getting a ride the whole night. I was beginning to consider turning around and dragging my sorry arse back to my not-so-loving mother and father when I heard the engine rumble behind me. The car that pulled over was run down. It was a very old model with a broken headlight and no number plates. The whole outside was spray painted and on the bonnet was a clown’s face, looking twice as sinister in the dim, orange light of the street lamps. The same could be said for the woman who poked her head out of the window. Through the gap, I could see she was barely dressed. She had a tiny pair of denim shorts on and some small piece of fabric that hardly even covered her full chest area. She was skinny, bony and covered in tacky tattoos. If I’d known any better, I would have said it was a bad idea to get into the car, but I was cold, sore, and very tired, so who was I to decline the opportunity?

“Uh, hi.” I stuttered slightly, leaning on the passenger side door. The woman grinned at me; she had yellowing teeth which were evidence of her constant smoking, but I also gathered that from the smell of the car.

“Where ya headin’, hun?” Chewing loudly on her gum she looked like a cow, jaw moving around in a full circle as she watched me.

“Um, I don’t really know, it depends,” I was starting to get a little nervous. “Anywhere I suppose. Which way are you going?”
EXOTICA

She giggled. “I’m goin’ to the Cross doll, no place for a little girl like yourself. Now, do you need a ride or not, ‘cause I’m gonna be late for work if you don’t make your mind up soon.”

“Kings Cross?” It was only the most popular place in Australia for gangsters, mob bosses and hookers. Fantastic, I'd blend in great. Not.

“Uh, yeah? Where else?” She was chuckling even louder now and I could feel myself beginning to shake.

“That’s perfect,” I mumbled, opening the door and sliding into the front passenger seat. I immediately reached for the seatbelt, only to find that there wasn’t one. Of course not. I shouldn't have been so surprised considering what the car looked like from the outside.

“So Baby Cakes, what’s your name?” She looked over at me, still smiling.

“Rosemarie, uh Rose. Just Rose,” I stuttered. I hated it when people used my full name. My parents used to do it all the time. "Rosemarie do this, Rosemarie don’t do that, you could do better Rosemarie, blah, blah, blah."

“Rose, that’s cute, like the flowa’?” She reached over and ruffled my hair. I cringed and moved to fix it.

“Well, Petal, I’m Laurie.” She extended a thin, bony hand with chipped red nail polish on her fingernails and winked. Reluctantly, I shook it and forced a smile her way.

Later a huge red “Coca-Cola” sign loomed over us. Kings Cross. For the first time in my life I’d be in the Cross. By myself. I had no idea what I was going to do. To my left I saw my destination. The infamous ‘Exotica’.
"See something you like?" says Laurie, the amusement evident in her voice. I can't stop staring. The signs, the lights, the huge crowds of people; it looks so different in real life. I'd seen it on TV before, but, like many things, seeing it for real was just so much more breath-taking. I pull my gaze away from it to watch the road. Laurie pulls in to a parking space right out the front of the club.

"Well, Petal, this is me." She points to the overcrowded night club. "Wait, you work here? You work at Exotica?" I am astonished. From what I'd heard, all the girls who danced here were beautiful, tanned, curvy ex-models; exotic women from all over the world, as the name suggests. Not shaggy, tatted, yellow-teethed skeletons. "I don't dance Babe, I'm just a waitress. I'm not the type to get a fancy costume with a pretty stage now am I?" She gives me a scary grin, looking up at me through her eyebrows. I give her a nervous laugh, putting a lot more effort into making it sound real than necessary. Laurie gets out of the car and I follow suit. She opens the boot of the car and pulls out a bag. Once she's out of the car, I notice that she has a pair of ripped stockings on and leopard print stilettos that are way too high for her scrawny legs. Once the boot is shut, she makes her way up onto the curb, grabbing my shoulder and pulling me into her body.

"So Dal, where are you going to go?" She says, shaking me a little.

“Truth be told, I don't really know, I should probably try and find somewhere to stay for tonight." I watched the line for the club. A large crowd of people bustling and moving, waiting to get inside. It was an odd sight, the people, so many different faces.

"Well, I get off work at 3 so if ya want to bunk with me for the night, you're welcome to." Again, she flashes me a smile, baring her teeth. We continue to walk around to the back entrance of the club while I consider Laurie's offer. As we approach the huge metal door, it opens. A bulky man, wide and tall, dressed in a black suit with a dress shirt and no hair blocks the doorway and gruffly acknowledges us before moving. As we enter, Laurie pauses and turns back to the man.
"Is Alexander here?" she asks, pulling her arm away from me. While she converses with the doorman, I give myself a moment to take in the astonishing sights around me. Directly in front of me is the crowded club, I can see the stage with lights flashing and girls in tiny costumes dancing on it. As Laurie finishes her conversation with the man, whose name is Jeff, according to their conversation, she makes her way back over to me with a huge smile on her face.

"What?" I ask, something in her eyes tells me she's up to no good.

"We have somebody to go see, baby. Alexander is going to love you." Alexander? As we walk through the crowded floors of Exotica, my mind is reeling. We reach the other side of the club and come to a large flight of stairs. As we start up them, a group of women in sparkly bikinis and high heels run past us. At the top of the stairs, there are more rooms lining a long corridor. We walk to the one at the very end of the hallway, Laurie tentatively knocks. Another large man in a suit greets us and ushers us inside. Laurie throws herself on a large couch and gestures for me to join her. I sit on a black chair that is facing a large desk in the middle of the room and look over at Laurie questioningly. As she starts to speak, I hear the door open again and two men talking. Laurie and I immediately turn around. Instantly, Laurie is off the lounge, hugging the man. I hear whispering, but can't quite make out what is being said. The man approaches me and I get a better look at him. His short, black hair is very neatly gelled back, complimenting his young face perfectly. He can't be any older than 25, and as I take in his features; I take note of his stunning green eyes, shifting in colour as the light changes around us. He’s tall and has a strong frame. Our eyes meet, and tentatively, I look away. This man is very, very attractive. That, I can’t deny. Not many people seem to impress me as much as him, especially none of the males my age; teenage boys seem to not grasp the concept of maturity too well. But he was something different. He had something else. My attraction to him seemed to be fuelled by something more than just his physical appearance, but what it was exactly, I had no clue. I mentally tried to snap myself out of my thoughts so I could pay attention to him as he sat down in his desk, directly in front of me. He kept his gaze on me, even as
he sat down, as if my eyes were giving away some big secret. I’ve never been one for stupid clichés, especially ones about love, but purely and simply, it felt as though this mystery man was staring straight in to my soul. The deepest, darkest pits of my very existence seemed to be pooling out of every pore in my body and in to his head. Yet, as his emerald eyes bore in to mine, I was still very aware of Laurie’s presence and the fact that I was in an office, in some upper class club in the middle of Kings Cross. In the back of my mind, I could hear a voice screaming at me, telling me that everything I had done and was about to do this evening was a bad idea; pleading for me to just get a cab home and pretend none of this had even happened, Alexander and his hypnotic gaze included. However, the less sensible part of my subconscious made sure that my body stayed exactly where it was in the leather chair. Whilst this internal struggle was taking place in my head, Alexander had made his way to behind the desk and sat down in the large chair, eyeing Laurie, who had a huge grin on her face. He let out an exasperated sigh and turned towards me.

“What do you want Laurie?” His thick British accent nearly knocked the wind out of me. The annoyance in his tone grew to every part of his face as he turned back to her, raising an eyebrow. Awkwardness filled the air around us while the two just stared at each other. Without even thinking, I cleared my throat. After I had, I swiftly placed a hand over my mouth, horrified at my own action. Eyes wide, they both turned to me, and within seconds they were both chuckling to themselves.

“It seems your new friend is almost as impatient as you are, Laurie.” The man continued to laugh. “Sorry honey.” Laurie shot me a look of sympathy. I think. “Alex, baby, this is Rose,” she made a sweeping gesture from Alexander to me with her bony hand. “Rose, Alex.” He was smirking, eyes locked on mine again. Laurie continued talking. “So Alex, Rose here needs a place to stay for a little while, so I was thinking she could stay with me.” A huge grin was plastered on her face and her eyes did not leave his. “And so maybe, she could work here for a couple of nights.” My jaw dropped. “You know, get her in with the rest of the girls for a little while.” She turned to me and winked. I tried to speak, but no words came out. Complete and utter shock pulsed through every
part of my body. She wanted me, a seventeen year old, to get up on a stage in some skimpy costume and dance for some weird old men? Who was she? The part of my mind that had been harping me about this being a bad idea began screaming, “I told you so”, but while all this was going on, my body refused to move. I protested but my words came out as nothing but incoherent mumbles.
“Seriously, Rose, babe, it’d be worth your while. Do you have any idea how much money those girls get paid?” Laurie reassured me, reaching over and grabbing my hand.
Before she could continue, Alexander spoke. “Laurie.” His voice was stern, and she immediately let go of my hand. I pulled it back to my lap and kept my eyes down. “Sorry about that Rose. Laurie doesn’t have fantastic people skills. If you could give us a minute that would be great.” He led Laurie out of the office. They must have only gone a few steps because I could hear almost their whole conversation.
“Laurie, what has gotten in to you?” Alexander hissed.
“She’s gorgeous Alex, look at her! She would fit right in! The guys would love her”.
“She can’t be more than seventeen.”
“You don’t think she’s what we need?”
“Laurie!”
“What? Do you think she’s pretty or not?”
“Yes Laurie, she’s gorgeous. But she’s sitting in that office scared out of her.” Alexander was becoming more agitated, but all I could think about was him saying I was pretty. I felt a blush slowly growing over my cheeks. I’d been told I was good looking before but hearing from someone like Alexander made my stomach flutter. I had light brown skin, hazel eyes and dark brown, almost black hair which I’d acquired from my Argentinean father. I was slim but I had more than enough curves for my age, I assume I got those from my Australian mother. All I heard next was Laurie letting out a huge sigh, then a moment of silence. I began to panic, thinking that maybe they’d realised I had been listening to the conversation, but they hadn’t.
“Look, she’s not dancing okay? A seventeen year old girl doesn’t deserve to live the rest of her life working here. If she needs some money, let her waitress for a couple of nights. She’s not dancing. End of discussion.” With that, the huge door opened again and they both made their way back inside.

“Sorry about that Rose.” Alexander sat on the edge of his desk. Even though the conversation had not gone her way, Laurie still had a huge smile on her face.

“Babe, Alex here was wondering if you wanted to waitress for a couple of nights. Earn yourself a bit of money and then you can go off on your merry way.” I swallowed. It was a good idea. Work here, serve drinks for a couple of nights, earn some money and then go do my own thing. I didn’t really need to put much thought in to my answer.

“Yes, actually that would be great.”

Alexander smiled at me, a more genuine smile than his previous ones. Laurie jumped up and down, running over and hugging me.

“Good choice.” She whispered and then made her way out of the office. I proceeded to follow her.

“Rose?” Alexander’s voice sent shivers up my spine. I turned to face him.

“Yes?”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how old are you?”

“Seventeen.” The smirk on his face grew. Something about that smirk told me that this man really liked being right.

“Thanks.” He nodded. I turned back to walk out of the office but stopped when he began speaking again. “Oh, and Rose?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t worry about Laurie. She’s harmless.” It was almost as if he’d read my mind. After her suggestion, I’d had a few reservations about staying with her. Yet, for some strange reason, I felt the need to trust Alexander, I felt safe following his advice. “If you’re going to be worried about
EXOTICA

anyone, it’s the people in the club, not the people working here.” I nodded, leaving him in the large office, his eyes following me out.

CHAPTER 3

Laurie was waiting for me outside the office. When she saw me, she took my hand and led me back down the staircase to the main part of the club. I managed to make my way past the tables of people whose eyes were to the stage where the next group of girls was about to perform. When we were at last behind the bar, she looked me up and down.

“You’re not really dressed for this job, are you?” I didn’t answer. I’d left the house in skinny jeans and a plain grey t-shirt. “That’s okay. We’ll find something for you later once tonight’s shift is over.” I scanned the club. It was so different from what I’d expected. Suddenly, little things in my head began to piece themselves together. I’d heard many things about Exotica and Alexander from my father, my adopted father, who worked for the New South Wales Police. Memories of him speaking to his Police buddies about it made their way back in to the fore-front of my mind. The police that my father knew all despised Alexander. He was young, successful and always stayed out of the eyes of law enforcement. From what I’d heard, he hadn’t actually ever done anything that broke the law, but they were always looking for a way to lock him up. I even remembered my father saying that Joseph Morganstein, the most notorious drug dealer in Sydney, had wanted Alexander’s head on a platter. There’d even been talk of the police working with them to take him out.

I’m not going to lie, I knew my father is a huge part of the corrupt police, he and all of the others I knew. They were all involved in putting innocent people in gaol and keeping the guilty out. Alexander was first on their list now. Everyone wanted a piece of Exotica. Alexander had made millions and millions of dollars from the club and they were all envious of his success; police and
Kings Cross drug lords alike. As I looked around the crowds of people, I tried to catch a glimpse of the people sitting at a table far on the other side of the club. There were three men in suits standing around the table, similar to the ones at the door of Exotica and Alexander’s office. VIP’s, I assumed. They’d have to be pretty important to have their own body guards. Laurie snapped me back in to reality.

”Hello? Earth to Rose.” She waved her hands wildly in front of my face. “Were you listening to a word I just said?” I shook my head. I tried to focus on her but I couldn’t help but think about who was sitting at that table with body guards. Who needs body guards in the middle of a club which is surrounded by bouncers?

“Rose! Listen!” Obviously she could tell that I’d zoned out again. “You go around to the tables, ask them what drink they want, come back to me, I make it, then you take it to them. Got it?”

“Yes, Laurie. Got it.”

“Go on then!” She ushered me out from behind the bar and I immediately headed over towards the table with the men in suits. I decided it wouldn’t be a good idea to go over there straight away, so I went around to the tables near them, asking them what they wanted and getting their drinks. After about half an hour, I was standing at the table next to the guarded one, giving a pair of men their beers when I heard someone yell; “What do we have to do to get a drink around here!?.” The voice had come from the table and once I’d gotten rid of the drinks I had in my hand, I rushed over. My jaw nearly hit the floor when my brain finally comprehended who was sitting down. The one and only Joseph Morganstein, not alone. Opposite him, were two of my fathers colleagues, two who I knew all too well. I turned my head away from the men I knew to face Morganstein. My mind was reeling; I had no idea what I was supposed to do. Of course, I was in Kings Cross so undoubtedly, sooner or later I was going to see a criminal, but I certainly did not expect to be serving drinks to the most criminal of them all. He wore a dark red suit with a white shirt and a dark red tie; he had a
sparing amount of thin, brown hair, with a large bald spot in the middle of his head. His fat fingers
tapped at the table and his ice blue eyes stayed on me.

“I’ll have a martini please Lovely.” He had a British accent but it was nowhere near as sexy as
Alexander’s. There was a creepy smile plastered on his face. He winked, a cold shiver ran through
my body, I couldn’t help but squirm.

“Anything for you two?” Luckily, my voice didn’t fail me; my words came out strong and
confident.

“Two beers.” One of the men grunted, barely audible. I nodded my head and smiled at them, swiftly
making my way from the table. I couldn’t help but feel like Joseph’s gaze was still on me. When I
got back to the bar, I turned to see if he was still looking at me, but he wasn’t. I got the drinks off
the bartender and took them back to the table. The men said their thanks and I tried to leave as
quickly as I could.
Morganstein stopped me. “Excuse me, Darling?” I turned to see him smiling at me again. “If I
might ask, what is a pretty lady like you doing serving drinks in a place like this? If anything,
shouldn’t you be up there on that stage?” He winked at me again.

“My job is just to do the drinks.” I plastered a smile on my face and walked away as confidently as
I could. The night continued into the early hours of the morning and 3AM was nearing. My routine
continued; taking orders, giving people their drinks. It was monotonous and boring but at least I’d
be earning some money. I tried my hardest to stay away from the Morganstein table, but
occasionally he would call me over and order another martini, flashing that smile and making some
snarky comment. At around 2:30, I was walking around the tables collecting the empty glasses.
There was an interval between the shows so there was no music playing, and for the first time the
club was almost quiet. I heard the beginnings of a conversation but missed the rest when I went
back to the bar. When I came back, however, the conversation between the drug lord and the two
out of uniform police men was even more chilling than before.
“We need to get rid of him, you understand that right?”

“Yes, I understand. I understand that better than anyone. But what you idiots need to understand is that it’s not just getting rid of Alexander. This place needs to be burnt to the ground. Exotica-No-More. Everyone needs to be reminded just who is in charge of this place, your buddies included.”

“Tonight,” he said. “It needs to be taken care of tonight. I’ve got my men, you’ve got yours. We need to get it done.” I suddenly realised what was going on. Joseph Morganstein and his police mates were going to burn the club down. I guessed without any thought to the people inside it. I took the empty glasses in my hand back to the bar and put them down. I couldn’t find Laurie, so I made my way back up to Alexander’s office, nearly stumbling over my own frantic feet. The man in the suit was outside the door still and I hesitantly asked him if I could see Alexander. He nodded, opening the door of the office, a swiftly made my way inside. He was sitting at his desk, pen in hand, paperwork scattered everywhere. He finished writing and looked up at me. Before I could say anything, his expression changed. In an instant he was up from behind the next, standing in front of me.

“Rose? What’s wrong?”

“Alexander…” I couldn’t find the right way to tell him. “Joseph Morganstein, he’s downstairs. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, I was getting the drinks and he was talking to some cops about you. About Exotica.” I spoke so fast I found myself out of breath.

“What? What were they saying Rose? Come on.”

“They were talking about burning the club down Alexander. Tonight. They’re going to kill you.”

Alexander looked at me for a second then his hands dropped from my shoulders. He turned from me and began chuckling. “What are you laughing at? People are going to die Alexander! They’re going to burn the place down, with everyone inside!”

“Rose, just relax.” He said, walking back towards me.

“No! Don’t tell me to relax! They’re going to kill people; they’re going to kill you!”
“They’re not going to kill me Rose. It’s Joseph Morganstein. He’s an idiot. Seriously. If anyone wanted me dead, I wouldn’t be here, they’d have done it already, okay? That man is a creep.”

The most unexpected part of the night came next, Alexander pulled me in to his body, arm wrapped around my neck, mine wrapped around his waist. My head was buried in his chest, the fabric of his white dress shirt soft against cheek. His aftershave was making my head spin; hugging someone had never felt so…right. We stayed like that for a while until he pulled away, hands running up and down my arms. His soft face changed in a split second. He backed away from me, pulling his hands away from my arms, the seriousness back in his expression.

“Sorry.” He muttered. “You can sit if you want. You might as well just finish your shift now. Not like it matters, I’m sure Laurie’s alright.” I did as he said and sat down in the same chair as before, him facing me on the edge of the desk. I kept my eyes down, my fingers picking at my fingernails.

“Rose? What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be at home? Sleeping or studying or something?” I couldn’t help but laugh. He had a point but it was pretty funny that he of all people would be asking.

“In case you hadn’t noticed I’m a teenage runaway.” I gestured to myself dramatically and he continued smiling at me.

“Yes, I had noticed. What I mean is, why?”

“It’s a pretty long story.” His question had caught me off guard. There were many reasons I’d left but I’d never thought anyone would actually ask me why.

“I’ve got time.” I had a gut feeling that he wasn’t going to let up. I wasn’t going anywhere until his question was answered. I slouched back in the chair and raised my eyebrow at him.

“Why do you think I left Alexander?”

“Mummy and Daddy wouldn’t buy you a pony?” Oh so he thought he was funny now? Well, two can play at that game.

“Ouch.” I crinkled my nose and licked my lips.
“I’m kidding.”

“I am aware of that.”

“If I guess right, what do I get?” He tilted his head to the side slightly, baring his teeth when he smiled softly.

“You won’t, so don’t worry about it.” I replied. Whilst I enjoyed playing this game with him, I was right. He wasn’t going to guess why I’d left. No one would.

“But say I did?”

“You get the joy of knowing my hideous life story. Pretty great prize if you ask me.”

“Sounds like a deal.” He reached over to me and extended his perfect hand. His fingers were long and slender. There was a ring on his middle finger, a plain silver band. Looking at his hand made me wonder whether he played an instrument; it wouldn’t be hard to imagine those graceful hands moving quickly along the keys of a piano. It also made me wonder what else he could do with those hands. When we’d hugged, his hands were tightly gripping my shoulders, I couldn’t help but imagine him running them up and down the sides of my body, over my stomach, gripping either side of my face.

STOP! Oh my god. My mind was a complete and utter mess. Here I was, fantasizing about a man I’d just met while he tries to talk to me about my parents. I tried to push those thoughts to the back of my mind, putting them down to lack of sleep. But as I shook his warm hand, they slowly made their way back to the front of my brain.

“Deal.” I whispered, just before I let his hand go. He opened his mouth to speak and the closed it again, eyes still locked on me. We both turned to the door when we heard a muffled bang from downstairs. I look back at him.

“Did you hear that?” He cut me off with a nod. As we both start to stand up, there is yelling downstairs. Then are loud pops. Not like things being dropped. I finally process what’s going on and stare at Alexander with fear. They’re gunshots.
In an instant, his hand is on mine, leading me from the office. When we get outside, he says something to the guard but I can’t hear the conversation. His hand is still on mine, gripping it tightly. He shakes the man’s hand and leads me down the corridor, passing the stairs which lead to the main area of the club. I hear Morganstein’s horrible voice yelling instructions, people sobbing and other men barking directions. Alexander doesn’t look back at me; he just continues to walk down the hall until we reach a large door. He swings it open, and we’re met with another set of stairs, leading straight down to the car park behind the club. We make it down the stairs and walk to a black Range Rover about 15 metres away from the club. He lets go of my hand to walk around to the driver’s side, reaching in to his pocket and pulling out a set of keys.

“Get in.”

“What are we going?” I ask, pulling my seat belt down.

“Secret.”

“We can’t just leave everyone there! We have to do something!” I pictured all of the people in the club, scared, waiting for Joseph’s orders, wondering whether or not they’d live.

“We are doing something.” His voice was stern. He chewed on his bottom lip as we drove, eyebrows furrowed. After a while, I broke the silence.

“I thought you said he wasn’t going to do it?” Momentarily, he pulled his green eyes away from the road and looked at me. He clenched his jaw and didn’t answer, turning back to the road. “Okay.” I mumbled, just loud enough for him to hear.

“I didn’t think he would.” His voice was quiet. “He’s threatened to do it before, but I never thought he’d actually try and do it.” He was biting his lip again.

“What are you going to do? They’re going to destroy the club.” I didn’t face him, I watched as the trees flew past while we drove out of the passenger side window.
“The club can be rebuilt.” He sighed. “It’s everyone inside I’m worried about.” I began to think of who was still in the club. The dancers, the bouncers, the guests and Laurie. Laurie! I’d completely forgotten about her. I prayed that she was okay, that maybe she wasn’t actually in the club when everything happened. I prayed that she was alive.

CHAPTER 5

I slipped in to unconsciousness, my fatigues finally making me crack. When I awoke, it was in shock. I’d been having a nightmare. Alexander had pulled the car in to a driveway was trying to wake me up.

“Rose? Rose wake up!” My face was sweaty and my body was flushed from my own heat. I sat up and wiped my forehead, opening the window slightly to let the cool morning air calm me down.

“Do you normally talk in your sleep?” said a worried Alexander, his hand still on mine.

“No. I don’t think so. I don’t know. What was I saying?” I couldn’t remember what I’d dreamt about, but I knew that it wasn’t good.

“Something about ‘Dad’. You seemed pretty worked up, are you alright?”

“Yeah. Yes of course. Yep. I’m alright.” Clearing my throat, I opened the car door and got out, bringing an abrupt end to our conversation. Alexander followed, locking the car once he was out.

“Where are we?” I asked, looking at the large house in front of me. There was a garage directly in front of us, the door painted a light grey. The exterior of the house was concrete, painted white. There was a small garden out the front.

“This is my house.” He began walking to the front door and I followed. “One of my houses,” he added.

“And exactly how many houses do you have, Alexander?”
“Only the two. I don’t usually stay here; I have a place closer to the club. It’s easier. This is just a sort of…back up.” He laughed and walked over to a switch to turn the lights on. Through the windows, I could see the sun starting to come up. We must have been driving for a few hours.

“When we left, I spoke to Ian, the man in the suit outside my office. I told him we’d come here and he said he’d call the police, get them to look after Morganstein. You should probably get some sleep.” He nodded towards me then made his way to the large kitchen.

“Says the one who’s been driving for hours,” I joked. It wasn’t really a joke though. He did look tired. Dark bags had started to form under his beautiful eyes. I sat down on a tall stool at a bench facing him. I unlaced my shoes and took them off, along with my socks and held them in my lap. Alexander finished turning all of the lights on and walked over to the bench where I was sitting.

“Are you hungry?” he said. As if reading my mind, he had already begun making his way over to the large silver fridge, opening the door and rummaging inside.

“If you don’t live here, then why is there food in the fridge?” I asked, puzzled, when he pulled out a box of leftover pizza.

“Laurie stays here sometimes.” Alexander shrugged his shoulders. He’d placed the pizza box on the bench and opened it, smiling when he realised there was a whole pizza still in it. He turned to the cupboards and got out two plates, passing me one. Before he took a piece, he walked out of the kitchen. I watched him as he took off his suit jack and tie, undoing the first few buttons of his dress shirt and quickly turned back when I noticed him looking at me. I took a piece of pizza out of the box and began to eat it. Until now, I hadn’t noticed how hungry I was; I devoured the piece rather quickly, causing Alexander to chuckle.

“When was the last time you actually ate?” he asked.

“That’s the thing, I don’t actually remember.” I took another. He just smiled at me, watching me while I ate. We finished the whole pizza in a short amount of time, mainly because of me, and he found some more food in the fridge for himself. We relocated from the kitchen to a large living
room with a huge TV and white leather lounges. I sat down on one of them, my mind reeling about what happened during the early hours of this morning. The sun was up now and the light streamed in to the house. Alexander offered me a shower and I gladly accepted. I’d left the bag with my other clothes in it behind the bar when Laurie was talking me through my new job but he found a plain white t-shirt and some pyjama pants for me to wear.

“Should I ask why you’ve got clean girls’ clothes in your drawers, Alexander?” I was trying to be funny, but honestly, the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Alexander was an incredibly attractive man; he probably had girls over all of the time, hence the clothes.

“I know what you’re thinking, Rose...” Something about the way he said my name made my stomach do back flips, the good kind of course. “It’s honestly not what you think. I bought them for Laurie when she moved in.”

“Oh, okay.” I said, unconvinced. He laughed at my pathetic response.

“Honestly,” he replied. His face was dead serious, his hands were up defensively.

“Yeah.”

“Ouch.” he remarked, copying my comment from our earlier conversation.

“I believe you.”

“Liar.”

“Can you please just show me where the bathroom is?” He didn’t say anything else, just nodded his head and led me to the bathroom. I sat in the shower for about 10 minutes, just letting the hot water scald my skin. When I realised I’d in the bathroom for a long time, I get dressed and walk back out in to the living room to see Alexander in black track pants and a white t-shirt, similar to mine.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m pretty exhausted, so I say we sleep for a little while and then sort out what we’re going to do later.”

“Sounds good,” I mumble.
“We’re going to be okay. You know that right? Everyone in the club will be fine. Once they realise I’m not there they’ll give up anyway. As soon as we left, Ian called the police so they’ve probably already dealt with Joseph Morganstein.” Dread pulsed through my veins as he said that last sentence.

“No. No. No. Not the police. Anyone but the police.” I ran my fingers through my hair and he watched me pace back and forth.

“What Rose? Why not the police? They can help us.” He had no idea that the police wanted him dead as much as Morganstein did. A huge lump formed in my throat and I tried to hold back my tears.

“Alexander…” I couldn’t finish my sentence. What were we going to do? They would find us. They would find him and they’d kill us both. He pulled me in for another hug and his lips met the top of my head. His gorgeous hands were spread across my back holding me in place.

“Rose, relax. Breathe. Why can’t we go to the police?” I didn’t reply, I focused on pulling myself together. My breathing became more balanced and I managed to somewhat calm myself down.

“The police, they…they want you dead as much as he does.” I whispered in to his chest. At first I thought he didn’t hear me but then his body tensed and he pulled me back so he could look in my eyes.

“How do you know?” he said, his hands still stroking the bare skin on my arms, giving me goose bumps.

“My father. Adopted father, he’s a cop. I remember him and his buddies talking about you. And back in the club two of them were there…with Morganstein.” Alexander inhaled deeply, his nostrils flaring. He turned away from me, running a hand through his recently dishevelled hair.

“Shit.” He breathed.

“I’m sorry.” I said, stepping backwards and sitting down on the cool leather couch. “I should have told you before. I just…I didn’t even think about it.” He walked back over to me and sat down on
my right side. Before I knew it, I was being pulled in to his body again, one of his arms around my
shoulders, the other holding my waist. His head was pressed against my temple and my fingers
fiddled with the white fabric of his shirt.
“What are we going to do?” I whispered. His thumb was rubbing small circles on my bare shoulder.
“I don’t know Rose.” He sighed. With that we both drifted in to a restless sleep.

CHAPTER 6

Lucky for me, the sleep I had that morning was dreamless. Not like the one I’d had in the car
earlier. I was woken up by the ringing of Alexander’s phone. We both stirred and he reached in to
the pocket of his sweat pants to get it.
“Hello?” he said, his voice was still dripping with sleep. I heard the person on the other end of the
line speaking, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying. Alexander did. He jumped up from
the white lounge with his free hand clenched tightly in to a fist.
“Morganstein.” He hissed. My head snapped towards him, eyes wide with shock. Alexander’s face
was full of anger, his knuckles white with rage. I heard silence from the other end of the phone and
then a female voice. “Laurie!” he yelled. The expression on his face had changed in a second. Gone
was the fury, replaced with the face of someone who was frantic. I heard her scream through the
phone and in a moment of crushing weakness, Alexander, the strong, composed man that I knew,
crumbled to his knees. A single tear fell from his eye as the screaming continued. “You’ll be okay,
I’ll be there in a little while okay?” His voice was soft and surprisingly calm, as if he were speaking
to a baby animal. The phone must have been returned to Joseph because the screaming stopped.
Before Alexander could say anything more, the line went dead. For a minute he didn’t move from
his place on the floor, without saying a word, he quickly got up and walked to the kitchen bench. He
got his keys and walked outside to the Range Rover. I walked behind him and got in the car when he opened it.

“What happened?” I said once he was in.

“The bastard’s got Laurie. That’s what.” He growled. I knew he didn’t mean to snap at me but I was still hurt by the roughness in his tone.

“What about everyone else?” I questioned. I was confused as to why he cared so much about one employee when there could have been many more who were hurt.

“I don’t care about everyone else.” Woah, okay so obviously she was more than just an employee. My mind wandered. Was Laurie his girlfriend? I shook my head, now wasn’t a good time to start getting jealous. We drove for about an hour in silence. I could tell Alexander was getting agitated about how long the drive was taking; however, he did seem to calm down a little. The whole time I was wondering about why he cared so much about Laurie. As if he was listening to my thoughts, Alexander was the first one to break the seemingly never ending silence.

“It’s not what you think,” he said. I chuckled to myself at his choice of words. The exact ones he’d chosen in our conversation at his house. He seemed to realise what I was laughing at and shot me a smile. “She’s my sister. They’re…they were hurting her. I need to help her.” It was almost a whisper but I heard him. Shock and relief flooded through me. I felt incredibly selfish for being relieved but I couldn’t help it. Then fear. His sister was being tortured by some sick man for her brother’s fortune. Pain was evident all over his face as he thought about her.

“It’s my fault,” he said. I could hear him fighting back tears. “I should never have given her that job in the first place. I told her I would look after her.” This time, he wasn’t talking to me, he was talking to himself. I had no words. Nothing I could say would make him feel any better, so I just stayed silent.

“You know,” he started, turning his head towards me. “You never told me why you ran away.” We both smiled.
“You were supposed to guess, remember?” I remarked, the smirk still plastered to my face.

“I was actually hoping you’d forgotten about that.” He sounded genuinely disappointed that I had remembered.

“A deal’s a deal Alexander.”

“That it is.” I wanted to tell Alexander why I’d run away but at the same time, I didn’t. I didn’t want to tell anyone about it.

“What about, you have one guess and then I’ll tell you?” He cocked an eyebrow, staring at me with surprise.

“Are you sure?” His voice was quieter. He was still looking at me, and the car started to swerve slightly.

“Yes, I’m sure, but can you please keep your eyes on the road Einstein?” He laughed again, turning his eyes forward to the asphalt in front of him.

“If you insist!” He winked at me, nudging me with his elbow. He took a minute before taking his guess; his face was unreadable, so I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. “I honestly don’t know. I mean you’re smart and beautiful, why would you want to leave home? Oh I know, you’re smart right, so you left because everyone wanted to live their lives through you? Planning your future as if it were theirs?” He looked pleased with himself. But I shook my head.

“Not quite,” I replied. “But that was part of it.” I took a deep breath and chewed at my lip. “My father,” I started.

“The cop?”

“The cop. My adopted father. He had some anger issues…he liked to take them out on me…” I couldn’t finish. My breath hitched in the back of my throat.

“I understand,” he said, indicating that I didn’t need to continue. Something I was very thankful for.

“I’m sorry.” There was sympathy in his tone.
“It’s okay. I’m here so this is definitely better,” I said with sarcasm evident in my tone. Alexander didn’t realise that I was being serious, this was better. The hours flew by with small talk. Nothing interesting. But it took our minds off the situation for a little while, something I think we both needed. When we got to the Cross, I began shaking, fearful of what was about to happen. We reached Exotica and Alexander drove in to the car park. He killed the engine and we both sat in the idle car for a minute. He took my hand and looked into my eyes.

“We’re going to be okay,” I said.

“We are,” he replied. “We’re fine.”

I opened the door and started to get out when he pulled me back. His lips connected with mine in a frenzy, one of his hands on my waist, the other cupping the side of my face, my hands wrapped around his neck. We both pulled away and he planted a soft kiss on my nose before he got out of the car. I made my way out also and walked over to him.

“Sorry,” He mumbled as we walked around to the front of the club. I didn’t answer, but took his hand. My fingers lacing with his.

CHAPTER 7

He held the front door of the club open for me, dropping his hand from mine. We both walked forward in to the middle of the club. Behind me, Alexander grabbed my hand again, but to hold this time. He placed something in my hand and held it there.

“Don’t turn around. Keep your eyes straight ahead.” He whispered, lips brushing my ear, his accent thicker than usual. I nodded my head slightly and looked around the empty floors of the club.

“I’ve just put a gun in your hand Rose, okay?” Nod. “If anything happens, I want you to use it understand?” Nod. “Do you know how to use it?” Nod. Somehow he knew that I would be able to use it. Or maybe it was a lucky guess...again. My father being a policeman did have its advantages.
Learning to handle a firearm was one of them. I didn’t know what type of gun it was but figured I would be quick enough to find out should I need it. He lifted up the back of my t-shirt and placed the gun down the back of my track pants. Neither of us had changed since we left his house in such a hurry. We walked further in to the middle of the dance floor to find an unconscious Laurie tied to a bar stool. Alexander ran over to her, untying her restraints. Once he had untied her, he held her face, trying to rouse her.

“Laurie, please. Please, you have to wake up.” He was pleading, the tears streaming from his eyes like a waterfall. Her face was bloodied and blood had soaked through her tiny shirt making it stick to her stomach and drip down her thin legs. From the fringes of the club emerged Joseph Morganstein. However, he wasn’t alone. Next to him was my father. Morganstein had that sick grin on his face yet again, staring me up and down with his sadistic, blue eyes. His gaze moved from me to where Alexander was frozen, Laurie clutching to his strong shoulder, conscious but barely. My father was staring at me, wide eyed and slack jawed.

“Rosemarie? What are you doing here?” He growled, as if my presence was of great inconvenience. “Oh! So you two know each other? Oh! Oh! How exciting this all is! Really!” Morganstein’s horrifying voice echoed through the empty club, making goose bumps cover my skin. My stomach felt heavy and the snarl grew on my face as he spoke, so chipper and cheery as if we were at a lunch date. My eyes stayed locked on my father’s and his on mine.

“I could ask you the same question. Dad.” The venom dripped from my words as I snapped at him. “You need to leave. Right now,” he ordered.

“Oh, I see, so I should let you kill this man?” I pointed at Alexander, who was staring at me with wide eyes. Fatigued, vengeful and frantic, he still managed to look unbelievably attractive. I gave him a reassuring nod and looked back at my father.
“Yes, Rosemarie, you should. This man is a liability to the police force, to the hierarchy of Australian crime; he needs to be taken care of. He hurts people. He will hurt you.” He hissed, pulling a gun out of his suit jacket and pointing it at Alexander. His comment made me chuckle. “Oh right, he hurts people! And you don’t? I’m your daughter for Christ sake; do you even remember what you did to me?” I was verging on tears, screaming at him. The anger that had built up over the years was finally coming out, all of it. “You are absolutely insane.” I added. “I hope you know that.” Before my father could say anymore, Morganstein started clapping and laughing, his eyes moving between the two of us. “Ladies and gentlemen, bravo! Bravo! What a marvellous way to start the show! Nothing like a little bit of family drama to spice things up a bit, right Alexander?” He had his eyebrows raised as he meandered over to Alexander and Laurie. “Alexander, Alexander, Alexander. My boy. Honestly, are you that stupid?” He reached in to Alexander’s pocket and pulled out a hand gun, letting the magazine fall to the tiled floor. Laurie winced at the loud bang. “Oops!” he giggled, pulling Alexander’s head up to look at him by his hair. Alexander let out a small grunt, pulling his face away from Morganstein’s. “Oops.” replied Alexander. He looked back over at me, his eyes saying all I needed to know. Joseph Morganstein made his was back to my father and took the gun out of his hand, still pointing it at Alexander. “Rose? Rose, yes.” His head turned towards me, the smile wiped off his face. “I’d recommend you close your eyes. This isn’t going to be pretty.” The grin was back, he winked at me again. He cocked the gun and placed it against Alexander’s head. Laurie let out a cry; she was obviously awake enough to know what was going on. “WAIT!” I screamed. “Wait! I’ll do it.” “What?” said Morganstein and my father at the same time, every set of eyes on me.
“I said I’ll do it. Dad, I’m sorry, you were right. All I wanted was for you to be proud of me. That’s why I left.” I was crying, the fear in my voice more obvious than ever.

“Well, what a lovely twist!” sang Morganstein. He gestured for me to come closer to him and I did as he said, taking the gun from him. I looked in to Alexander in his eyes and could feel the betrayal in his gaze.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. He just nodded and turned his head to the floor. I walked around behind him and held the gun against the back of his head. Laurie was whimpering beside him. We all stood still for a few minutes, the silence broken by Morganstein clearing his throat.

“Sometime today, please?” he hissed. His annoyed gaze pierced my mind. Alexander moved his head sideways, his body following, and turned around to face me entirely. Laurie managed to hold herself up while the man looked at me. Without warning, Alexander pulled my body in to his, hands running up and down my back.

“We’re okay,” was all he said before turning back around, his hands behind his back.

“We’re okay,” I repeated, loud enough for Morganstein and my father to hear.

CHAPTER 8

In an instant, the gun in Alexander’s hand was pointed at the crime lord, my own at my father. I fired twice and Alexander once, then the two men fell to floor in a bleeding heap, silent. Alexander swept Laurie up in his arms and carried her out to the Range Rover. Once we were in the car, Alexander left us and went back in to the club. 10 minutes passed, then 15. After 20, he came back to the car and started it. I sat in the back seat with Laurie’s head resting on my lap. As we drove past Exoitca, I noticed smoke bellowing out of the windows.

“Alexander what did you-” He just shook his head and looked at me through the rear view mirror.
“It had to be done. We couldn’t exactly leave two dead guys just laying there.” He tried to make a joke about it but his tone was thick with sadness. And then it hit me. In a huge wave all at once, everything hit me. I had shot my father. My father was dead. Because of me. Half of me told myself that it was okay, that he hadn’t suffered. That the things he’d done to me were much worse than that. But I had killed someone. That couldn’t be changed. The thought made me want to vomit. The nagging feeling in my mind would be with me forever. It would never go away. I could never forgive myself.

We drove in silence to the hospital. Aside from Laurie muttering here and there, nothing else was said. Alexander watched me through the mirror but I never returned his gaze. We made it to the hospital in less than 30 minutes but I stayed in the car. After an hour or so, Alexander made his way back out and got in the back seat with me.

“She’s alright. They want her to stay for a few days but she’s going to be alright.” He said, pulling his arms around my body.

“That’s good.” I muttered, still not looking in to his eyes.

“Rose…” He said, using a finger to lift my chin, forcing me to look at him. “You did what you had to do. I know it wasn’t necessarily right, but just remember that we’re alive because of you.” I opened my mouth to reply, but no words came out. I simply nodded.

“Let’s go home and get some rest, okay?”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled.

“Don’t be sorry. You saved my life. Remember that.” His hands gripped either side of my face, his emerald eyes gazing in to mine. We stayed like that for a moment until I pulled away, opening the back door of the car and relocating to the front passenger side. Alexander got in the driver’s side and started the car. He pulled out of the hospital after watching me pulling my hair with my fingers.
Almost as soon as we left the hospital I fell asleep, not even waking up when Alexander carried me in to his house, placing me on the large bed and pulling up the covers.

EPILOGUE

3 Months Later

Alexander and I lay on the sun beds side by side next to the pool. “Coming for a swim, darling?” I shake my head. “Not now. Later, I’m just getting warm.” Giggling like some giddy school girl, I wink at him as he pouts at my reply. He walks away from me and dives into the pool with more grace than a swan, I can’t help but smile. Ten minutes go by and Alexander is still in the pool, swimming a few laps up and down. His phone starts to ring and I reach over to pick it up, placing my sunglasses on the small table on my right. The screen says ‘private number’ so I answer it. “Rosemarie!” My body freezes. Knuckles white as I fist the cushion underneath me, my jaw is clenched and all of my limbs are wound so tight, I feel I might burst. The voice on the other end of the phone is one I never, ever expected to hear again. “How’s Alexander?” He chimes, voice as cheery as ever. He knows where we are, he’s probably going to find us. I come to the sudden realisation that we’re both going to be hunted by this man until we’ve be taken care of and this time, he’ll come for us with a vengeance “I just wanted to give you a call, you know, let you know that I made a full recovery. After Alexander’s minor set back of course. I’m sure you remember. Your father was there. Yes. Well, Rose, I certainly do hope to see you soon!” The line went dead. All that was running through my head was his voice, dripping with the need for revenge.
EXOTICA

Alexander is out of the pool. His hands wrapped around my shoulders trying to pull me back in to reality.

“Who was on the phone?” The name gets caught in my throat and I feel like my stomach is being ripped out of my body. I try to compose myself and tell him who it was but I can’t. Tears are stinging my eyes and my limbs refuse to move. Complete terror consumes my body, even as I look in to Alexander’s peaceful eyes.

“Rose? Tell me.”

“Morganstein.” I choke, nearly throwing up my lunch in the process. Alexander’s face hardens and he sits down on the other sun bed. “He’s not dead. Joseph Morganstein is still alive. And he’ll be coming after us.”
Letters to a Fallen Mother

Memorial gardens have always seemed too pretty to be a resting place of the dead. Where she stands, there’s nothing but endless fields of grass and flowers covering the ground; beneath her feet, hundreds of dead bodies lie. Resting, never stopping to snore or turn uncomfortably as they seek comfort. Their final resting place is also their final position.

But the beauty of the place masks the horror. Perhaps it’s a way of putting mourners to peace as they sit beside their long passed loved ones. It brightens the mood and makes them a little reassured that their relatives can truly rest in peace.

She never thinks about that. Her mind is much simpler, the innocence of a child destroying the endless stretches of loneliness and sorrow that would be residing there instead. Her mind is calmer, as a ten-year-old’s should be. She takes no deep breaths to hold back sobs, for she never has any tears or wishes or splashes of sadness that outweigh the positives of life and cause ashamed cries. She doesn’t think her life is bad enough to show any sign of weakness. There are people in other places that would probably kill to have her life.

Besides, what is a dead mother compared to so many other horrible things in life? She could be starving, homeless, without the calming jingle of coins in her pocket. To her, even the silver coins feel like wind chimes to her still developing ears. Some people have nothing in life. Her mother had always told her never to be ungrateful. Therefore, ungrateful is the last thing she wants to be.
She’s been sitting in front of her mother’s gravestone for who knows how long. It could have been hours, but with her racing mind, what feels like hours is probably only a half hour or so. She doesn’t mind. Her father leaves her there sometimes to think. That’s what she has told him she likes to do there.

“Why do you want to stay there?”

“To think.”

It’s a simple answer; short and bittersweet, though to her father it may be a little more on the bitter side. He never questions it, though. She is ten, so she probably doesn’t have a clue what she means herself. Instead, he just drops her off. He leaves her there until he feels like picking her up, which is usually after an hour or so.

What does she do for that hour? For her, it is more of a thinking session. That’s what she tells herself. Really, she really doesn’t do that much thinking at all. She just sits there, paying attention to her own breaths and blinking patterns. They are the only accompaniment a middle-classed ten-year-old needed. Again, that’s another thing she tells herself day after day.

She never talks to her mother. She never even thinks about speaking. Instead, she just sits, occasional bursts of wind blowing past her and harshly caressing her face, causing the flyaway strands of her hair to tickle her nose. She sneezes, too, though regrets it later. She feels it ruins the balance of the silence.
Yes, talking is something she doesn’t do. Ever. It feels like a Sin to open her mouth and have her voice cut through the wind. Whenever the slightest sound is made, the ducks in the stream down the hill fly away, ignoring everything else as if their lives depend on it. If she stays still, they never notice her at all.

That’s why she never does anything at the memorial garden. She just sits, watching and waiting for nothing in particular. At home, she would prepare herself for the visit that happens once per week.

She recalls when she was at home, sitting on a chair with her feet dangling centimetres from the ground. She was a happy child at that point, smiling to herself as she scribbled with the pencil in her hand leaving messy curls of attempted cursive writing on the pages of crisp white paper. She likes writing letters to her mother, even if she never gets any reply. Before she left the next day, she had shoved them in her bag before she hurried out the door, feet as light as a pixie on the pavement outside her house.

As one more gust of wind blows by, she pulls her backpack over her shoulder and unzips it, knowing that there can’t possibly be anything else to scare off. The letter is crumpled, writing smudged in places and slanted slightly since she had no lines to guide her words. Maybe there are a few spelling mistakes or grammatical errors, but she doesn’t care. Nor does her mother, she likes to think.

She suddenly has a moment of self-consciousness as she folds up the paper and places it over the plaque on the gravestone, but she resists the urge to turn around and gaze at the non-existent person that is undoubtedly staring at her at this very moment. She knows
that doesn’t make sense, so she places a pebble on the paper so it won’t fly away and stands up, turning around and walking back to the car park to wait for her father.

Maybe this time, she’ll get a reply.

*

“Amanda!”

The hours have flown by since the memorial garden scene. She is now sitting on her bed, her tiny hands gripping the covers and her legs swinging back and forth to the beat of the music she isn't listening to. It is exactly 7:30, the time her father had said dinner would be ready. She’s been waiting for it, counting the seconds that go by until her father’s voice would ring up the stairs and enter her ears. Now, the waiting is over, and she leaps off of her bed and lands with a light thud on the ground.

The house had been quiet until the smaller of the two inhabitants had bounded off of her bed and scurried down the stairs. She isn't usually a noisy child. Much less of the sort. She is calm, unscathed by scars of her past that she will probably notice when she gets older. For now, no one dare remind her of the haunting that will enter her brain once she finally begins to consider her life. For now, she is carefree, and no one questions that.

For now, her mind revolves around monsters under the bed at night and luxury escapes to her own dreams. Ironically, she isn't really escaping, just digging further into her mind to uncover wishes and goals that have been buried by her selfless demeanour. She’s
encountered negativity before, but she tends to hide all of that deep enough within herself so that she never suffers nightmares or fearful thoughts.

It certainly makes her father’s job a lot easier. But, then again, when it all hits her, it will be the downfall of humanity itself.

Perhaps not something that drastic. She’s only a girl, after all. What can a girl do to the world that will ruin more than two people’s lives? Either way, her father chooses to savour her current age for as long as he can. He figures that bringing up a teenage girl by himself will not be a fun task, though he chooses not to think about it as he washes the pots and pans previously used to serve up dinner. The girl can eat a lot for one as young as her, that’s for sure.

Sleep, for her, is a whole different matter. When she lies down and closes her eyes, she enters one of two things. Either a black hole of pure darkness that wrenches at her bones and tosses daggers carelessly at her scars. God forbid they carefully toss them; who knows what they’ll hit to make her life the slightest bit pessimistic?

She usually dodges them, though, her mind filled with happy thoughts that generally outweigh anything else that may try to gun her down. She’s not afraid of murderers or goblins or monsters under the bed. If anything, they’re afraid of her. It’s not that she fights back, because they’re still there, ready to emerge when her life begins to fall once more.
The second option is a lot lighter than the first. It takes weight off of her shoulders and makes her head that much less clammy and humid. In her dreams, her mother replies to her letters, writing happy thoughts and tells her of stories up in Heaven that no one else could possibly tell. The parchment is the colour of clouds, never turning and resorting to a storm, but staying white and crystalline pure.

Those are the dreams she desires, though she would never admit she desires them. That is another thing that she pushes back down, never to be seen again. She’s burying an awful lot of thoughts down in her head, but right now, she’s happy.

*

He’s not like the other boys. He’s slick, fox-like, with a pointed nose and squinted eyes. He likes to hide rather than fight, and teasing would probably follow that if he ever got noticed. Boys are weird creatures, he thinks, though he is one himself, of course. They don’t apologise or admit defeat. Even if they know they are wrong, they still keep arguing. They move around in packs of wolves, sniffing out the weak ones as their prey.

But then again, when do wolves ever seek out foxes?

He blends in with the crowd, not fighting anything, but hiding, slick fur and twitched nose spying on anything that may step into his own path. But he doesn’t attack them. He’s too shy to do that. Instead, he gazes on, never noticed by anyone else. That’s his life; a lone animal. He likes to think he doesn’t need friends to survive in such a harsh habitat. Well, a school ground, anyway.
Some people single out others. There’s the bullies, of course, but everyone knows them. There’s the musicians, the artsy ones, the dancers, the singers, the footballers, the future Olympians. They all fit into specific categories, never separating from their own. They are discriminated if they do step out of line or even ask another group a question. Forbid the singers talking to a footballer. All Hell breaks loose if that happens. Well, rumours start to spread, anyway. But in secondary school, rumours are probably about third on the list of bad things that can happen to you.

Then there’s Fox Boy. Stealthy, slick, hiding from the rest of civilisation as he simply seeks out what he’s meant to do with life. He’s probably found it somewhere. He’s found pretty much everything, he likes to think. Yes, he’s found everything, but nothing has found him. He’d be surprised if anyone knew he actually existed if his name wasn't called on the roll every morning in class, and he still gets odd stares from children with looks in their eyes that scream, “Who is he?” “Do we even have a Michael?”

Actually, they don’t have a Michael. Not anymore. Michael disappeared long ago, along with his general existence.

Oh, but some of the things he’s seen; they amuse him so. Amuse him enough to make his brown eyes widen and nose twitch a little faster as he points it to the air. He hasn’t seen creepy things, no, not those kinds of things. But if there is a group of girls gossiping about some boy, he would know. In his head, he has a list of which girl likes which boy, which boy hates which girl, and who is coming where in the soccer tournament whether the actual soccer team know or not.
And of course, he definitely knows that good old Amanda Robertson’s mother died three months ago.

He snickers slightly at the thought. He knows exactly what she looked like from the photo of her Amanda keeps in her wallet everywhere she goes. Long red hair, dark eyes, basically an older version of Amanda herself. He knows it all, and if Amanda finds out, he’ll probably be slapped until he can’t see anymore.

That is, if she can catch him first.

Because no one catches him. He’s been running since he was born. But he can’t help but think; how long can he run for?

*

Amanda Robertson…

He’s always been curious about her. She’s one of the many things he’s curious about. Only one of the things. The people, the rumours, the gossips that the girls can’t possibly keep inside their own flighty little heads.

But he’s not necessarily curious about those things. He knows too much about them to actually wonder about them. They’re fact, not fiction, in his tiny little brain that’s crammed with far too much information for an eleven-year-old to handle. He handles it, though, without too much of a struggle. He’s just not sure what he’s going to do with the information.
Actually, he’s never planned to do anything with it.

Back to Amanda.

He watches her, eyes brighter and more curious than ever before. She’s so happy, optimistic, never thinks about anything negative in life no matter how much of it she encounters. He, of all people, knows that she’s encountered more of it than most people would. Even so, if he were a normal boy, he would not look at her and think she’s been through any hardships.

As he gazes at her frail form, she skips happily, eyes closed in a state of bliss, like nothing else in the world that exists is actually around her. He can see the ghosts that follow her – metaphorically, of course. He’s no supernatural creature. Just a fox…

Nothing special.

She’s special, though. He can feel it, like a light surrounds her and wards off evil beings before they can even enter the slivers of atmosphere around her. She’s a pure soul, and he knows it more than anyone.

At the end of school, the bell chimes like a thousand diamonds hitting against glass. Rattling, about to fall of the wall – they’ll need to replace that soon. Patters of feet and chatters of children fill the room as they leave, rushing to pick up their bags and get away from school as quickly as possible. None of them particularly like it. They don’t like the work. But really, who does? You’d think they’d get used to it, he thinks. They do spend most of their time there, after all.
He’s just another one of the crowd as he scurries amongst them, only walking fast
because the movements of the people around him say he must. He doesn’t want to be
frantic, but they push him, not even noticing his scurrying form. He’s a nobody, and no
one talks to nobodies.

As he reaches the front gate, most students are already long gone or entering busses that
are ten times as noisy as the children that enter them. He’s walking slowly, head down,
chin tucked to his slowly beating heart. He’s calm as he’s ever been – as he ever is.

Then he spots Amanda.

She’s walking home, singing a merry tune to herself, a certain spring in her step that no
developing girl has. At his school, anyway. Like everyone else, she doesn’t notice him,
doesn’t even turn around to see whose footsteps are following behind him. It’s like she’s
not even breathing, though a girl in such a blissful state will surely not notice any breaths
that may enter her lungs.

What does he do? He’d like to know where she lives, what kind of life she has. Of
course, he doesn’t want to appear creepy at all. He’s simply curious. When it’s him,
curiosity is a dangerous thing. He knows far too much for his own good, and he only
wants to know more.

He’s not really sure why he follows her, but he does. He makes it look like he’s simply
walking home in the same direction. She doesn’t even think about turning back to see
who is behind her, so, as they walk, she doesn’t notice him as he walks down the street to
wherever she is going. Neither do the people in the village, or the shopkeepers, or the shoppers themselves. They don’t even stop to glance at him, though he’s not much of a threat to her at all. He’s only a boy.

It’s not until they get to the calmer side of town that he realises that she isn’t going home. There are no houses around that area, only plains of grass and sunlight – except when it rains, of course, but the place is generally beautiful.

The earth around him is now lined with trees and bushes, general greenery throwing itself at him. He squints at the sudden blast of pleasantly warm sunlight, not really sure if he likes it or not. It only makes him more noticeable, and the last thing he wants is to be noticed.

But she doesn’t even glance at him. Instead, she walks into the last place he expects her to, but, at the same time, he’s surprised he didn’t think of that place the second he realised she wasn’t going home.

And of course, underneath the green crust of the earth are the hundreds of dead bodies that lie, sleeping soundly and silently, never to emerge again.

To him, the memorial garden is too beautiful to be a place of mourning.

But, before he can even take another stealthy and somewhat reluctant breath, she’s gone. When he looks up, there’s no human in sight, only the breathtaking view of the gardens, overshadowing anything that may come by with its misguided looks. Because, really,
they are manipulative. It’s hard to believe anyone would shed a tear in such a beautiful place.

He’s completely forgotten about Amanda now, more focussed on playing his own mind games. His own head takes over, subconsciousness controlling his legs rather than his own self. But he doesn’t fight it. He continues to walk, ignoring everything else. He doesn’t mind; it’s only a memorial garden, after all. It’s not like the dead can jump out and haunt him. They may surround them, but in such a place, they are powerless.

As he walks past the rows of graves and stones, he kicks at the grass with the tips of his toes. Hands behind his back, eyes planted firmer on the plants on the plaques and words of sorrow that describe the people beneath the earth. Well, really, they describe only the people they used to be, for now they’re gone. Dead to the world.

And, like everyone else, they don’t see him even as he walks right by them, staring uncontrollably at them. Even when all of his attention is on them and nothing else, he is still ignored.

It’s then that he turns his head up to see Amanda, sitting in front of who he assumed is her mother’s grave. She’s not crying. Instead, she’s staring, unmoving, unblinking, eyelashes fluttering in the delicate wind that barely exists. He’s sure that, in her mind, it doesn’t exist. Nothing exists but her and her mother.

If he wasn't so curious, the scene would have been beautiful to his darkened eyes.
He finds himself sitting, ears twitching occasionally as he tries to hear the words she will never say. It feels as if she has to speak at such an appropriate time. But she doesn’t. If anyone walked past, he wonders if they would notice her perfectly stationary body. But he, of all people, knows how it feels to go unnoticed. Perhaps she does, too.

He’s not sure how long he’s been there for when she stands up. It’s the first time he’s caught himself staring in quite awhile. He usually does it unconsciously, like his eyes are forcing themselves in front of people. Usually, when they leave, so do his eyes, and his entire body follows, as if he’d never been looking in the first place. This is the first time he can remember he’s actually manually stopped himself from staring.

Instead of standing up like she does, he remains sitting, wondering if she will see him. They are the only people in the garden, after all. He’s not sure whether or not he wants her too, or if it is even possible for her to flick her gaze over to him. This day seems to be an odd day, however, filled with things that wouldn’t usually happen to him. Maybe something unusual will happen to her.

Just as he’s about to give up unwanted hope on being spotted, he takes one last glance at her eyes. His heart lurches uncomfortably and he shoots his hand up, digging his fingertips into the flesh around his chest as his breathing suddenly grows heavy.

Because her eyes aren’t right in front of her. For a split second, he’s sure they’re planted on him. Their looks are similar. He assumes so, anyway. Her lips are slightly parted, though she now seems to be looking away in a disciplined manner, like it would cost her life to return his dumbfounded gaze. Her hands are together, fingers entwined in a
nervous frenzy, a mass of flesh-like vines wrapped around each other, grown so much that it’s too late for them to turn back.

Then, she turns quickly, breath suddenly quickening enough so that he can almost see her chest rising and falling from where he sits. She breaks into a run, fingers hesitating to separate as she sprints up the chipped stone stairs, skipping every second one in a forgotten frenzy. When she turns a corner, she’s enveloped in bushes and trees, only the soft movement of her shadow to show that she still exists. Then, she’s gone.

Ears twitching, nose perking up, the boy fox turns back to the grave of the dead mother. His curiosity is back, though it’s met with a sense of cautiousness that doesn’t usually come about when he wants to know something. Of course, it doesn’t overtake the urge to seek knowledge, so he fights off the cautiousness and instead advances on the grave, ignoring his shaking body.

The grave that he meets has a certain shine to it compared to the others. He’s not sure what it is, but it certainly stands out with a gleam that his eyes absorb without mercy. The top of it reads “Callie Robertson”, though he already knew her name. Reading it on a grave was somewhat different to hearing it from some gossiper’s mouth.

He finds himself sitting, eyes glued to the tablet as he reads the words engraved into it over and over again, eyes barely moving as he takes in all he needs to know. When she died, what age she was. He even memorises the poem that is spoken in honour of her memory. It feels, to him, like the only grave comfortable enough to fit in such a pretty place.
There’s something underneath the stone, he thinks, reaching a hand out to touch whatever it is. It’s crisp, white, and thin, odd curls of messy pencil scribbled all over it in a neatly messy way that he can’t quite describe. With a shaking hand, he picks up the paper, pulling it from the place that it was previously lodged underneath a rock.

As soon as he reads the words on top, “Dear Mum…” he knows that there’s no turning back. He has to read the entire thing, whether or not it feels like he’s invading anyone’s personal life. He’s done so before by listening in on conversations that really have nothing to do with him. But reading a letter to a fallen mother? That’s the furthest he’ll probably ever go.

Now he understands why Amanda doesn’t speak to her mother. Everything is written on this one piece of paper, so detailed that no speaking needs to go on in order to have a decent conversation.

Conversation…

What about the conversation partner?

He scratches his head, pouting his lip slightly as he turns the letter around. I wonder if she ever gets a reply is what he thinks, but he quickly shakes the thought out of his misguided brain.

Of course she doesn’t get a reply. Her mother can’t write in her state.
Knowing this, he suddenly feels the first real wave of sorrow waver across his body, carried by an appropriately timed breeze. She puts so much detail into the letters, probably spends hours planning what to write, but they go to waste…

But do they? Does she need a reply? Maybe she just writes them for her own comfort, or perhaps it’s a simple pastime.

He’s not sure what she’s hoping to accomplish by writing the letters.

And he’s certainly not sure what he’s hoping to accomplish by pulling out his own pen and beginning to write what he hopes is an anonymous reply to Amanda Robertson.

* 

She’s not sure what she’s thinking as she walks home. Or rather, runs, for her pace is definitely not as calm as it would usually be.

Her heart is racing, pounding like a drum and threatening to burst out of her chest like the monsters that always cease to reside in her brain. That boy… She’s sure she’s seen him before, she just doesn’t know where. His tattered clothes, his fox-coloured orange hair. Yes, all of those features are strangely familiar, though so annoyingly familiar that she can’t quite contemplate whether or not her mind is just playing tricks on her.

Actually, that’s probably what it is, and she nods firmly as she comes to the conclusion. Just her mind, mixing up other people to relate aspects to the boy that she most definitely has *not* seen before.
Her mind begins to stray away from such thoughts. She doesn’t like thinking like that. She never has, especially when walking home from a visit to her mother. She should be happy after handing her the letter and leaving, knowing that her mother could rest peacefully for one more day, confident that her daughter is still happy.

She’s not sure what she wants to accomplish by writing the letters. To make her mother happy is one of the options, but that’s definitely not what her original plan of action was. It’s definitely a selfish reason, somehow putting her own soul at rest for the rest of the day until she wakes up to a brand new morning, ready to take on the day like she would any other.

Maybe the reason will come to her one day, when her pen is clenched in her hand and her lips are stretched in a state of absentminded concentration as she thinks about what exactly to write to her mother. But for now, the reason simply sits silently, observing her life and waiting to be uncovered. She doesn’t mind, though. Not anymore.

*

He follows her to the memorial garden the next day, too. He’s not sure what he’s thinking. Then again, he’s never really sure what he’s thinking anymore. He can’t help but notice her nervous glances over her shoulder every-so-often, anxious eyes wide as if she can already see him, stalking through the bushes as he eyes her like a tiger would eye its prey.
That’s what he’s resorted to. School wasn't much different, at least, only it’s usually much easier to hide away from her during that time. He would simply dive into a crowd of people whenever her head would turn in a fit of laughter or an intention to talk to another one of her friends. She’s never suspected a thing when he watches her; he can see it in her eyes as he stares. Of course, no one notices him watching her.

Now, there’s no one to conceal him from what could be his fate. If she finds out who he is, she’ll no doubt tell her friends, who will spread it around. He knows. He always knows. Her friends, completely opposing her, are some of the biggest gossips in the school, among the other girls, of course. But their giggles almost always fill the atmosphere, and just hearing them laugh is intimidating to anyone who doesn’t want something about them to be spread all the way around the school.

Now, the only things to hide him are the bushes on the side of the road, and thank God they exist. He’s a little obvious. Well, he would be obvious if he wasn't himself.

Before he knows it, he finds himself hiding in a different bush, one that resides inside the memorial garden. It’s overshadowed by other, much prettier bushes, but it’s good enough to hide a spy, especially when he’s not normally noticed anyway.

He blinks, his heart pounding almost out of his chest as he eyes her. She sits down to stare at the plaque like she always does. He wonders how many hours she’s spent in front of the grave in the past three months.
But, in the end, that’s not really what he’s there to wonder. He’s not there to wonder anything. Instead, he’s there to watch and wait. Watching and waiting… He does an awful lot of that in his life. Perhaps he should do something more. Either way, until he digs around in the pile of information that he already has at his doorstep, he won’t find what he really should do. Somewhere in the pile, probably at the bottom, knowing his luck, there’s the meaning of his life, what he’s meant to do with it.

For now, however, he’s watching and waiting.

Watching for her eyes to move to the letter.

Waiting for her to pick it up.

Watching as she unfolds it.

Waiting for her hands to begin to quiver and shake uncontrollably as she turns it over and realises that the back of it isn't completely blank like she left it.

And, after another quarter of an hour, she does all of those things in that exact order except for the last.

He suddenly feels extremely self-conscious. What if she realises the handwriting isn't her mother’s? What if she throws the letter on the ground and runs away with tears in her eyes.
Or what if, by some ungodly chance, she turns and points directly at him, knowing that he was the scheming thief that wrote on her precious letter.

What if… That’s really all he can think about right now.

There’s a moment of silence that flows through the air, turning stiff as he nearly cracks under its weight. He wants to scream, cry, jump out of the bushes and yell to the world that he was the one that did it. But the silence intimidates him, mocking him from afar as it stands by her. He plants his eyes on her as she darts through the letter, a look on her face that shows she doesn’t have a clue what to think.

_Stupid._

The word whispers mantra in his head, taken in the form of his little scheming mistakes that haven’t ever come out until now. It has a sing-song voice, as if it takes glee out of his own nervousness. It’s mocking him. The only thing that has ever paid enough attention to mock him, and it’s his own head.

Dry mouth, wet face, he continues to stare, eyes growing wider and wider with every word he sees her read. Him and her… They’re just as terrified as each other.

She’s scared because someone touched her letter.

He’s scared because that someone is him.

There’s another moment of stiffness.
Then, she smiles.

It’s not just a small smile, either, like the shy ones she would usually give to her friends when she’s feeling sheepish. No, it’s a genuine smile. She’s beaming at the letter, her entire face stretched out as she reads it again and again. Over and over and over until her eyes are too tired to read anymore.

Suddenly, neither of them are scared anymore.

He swallows his non-existent breath that he’s been holding for awhile. His body is as empty of oxygen as it is of fear. He’s not scared anymore. In fact, he’s the most relieved he’s been in his life. If he could actually think straight, he probably would have smiled. But for now, he’s simply bathing in pure relief and, to some respect, satisfaction. Whatever his plan was, it definitely worked, though at the time he didn’t really know what he was thinking.

Looking up, he sees her standing, legs shaking back and forth, threatening to collapse under her weight. The letter is scrunched up now, her grip fastening around it like iron claws. It’s like she never wants to let go of it, just keep it with her forever.

She seems reluctant to leave now, he observes, seeing that her feet are much more comfortable staying on the soft green grass beneath them. They seem more comfortable there, though after awhile, she forced them to move as she drops a new letter down on the gravestone and turns around. She doesn’t bother to look back at the paper as it floats to
the ground, landing neatly just over the plaque and lying there, perfectly still as its writer
runs up the stone steps.

Through all of this, he hasn’t been seen at all.

Well, she seemed convinced enough that her mother replied. It may seem odd, but he’s
quite satisfied that he managed to convince her. Either that or she’s just happy that
someone cared enough to actually try to convince her. Something deep down inside of
him is praying that it’s the second option. He doesn’t want to let her down. Not now. Not
ever.

He doesn’t think of when a good time to stop would be, or the consequences. Maybe
she’s already convinced that this will be a one time thing. He doesn’t want that.
Something about that face… He wants to see it again.

So, looking around to make sure no one else may be spying on him like he was spying on
her, he pushes the branches of the bush apart and steps out onto the grass. He breathes a
sigh of relief, glad to not have to constantly feel scratches on his arms of the branches
that mercilessly rip at them, propelled by the slightly windy conditions. Unfortunately for
him, slightly is enough when he’s standing inside of the one thing that can attack him.

The letter that now lies on the plaque is made up of lined paper this time. Her writing is
not slanted. It doesn’t run in a downwards direction closer to the bottom of the paper.
Instead, its neat and easier to read, appropriately spaced out so that nothing is crammed.
He doesn’t have to squint this time, so it’s easier to get a reply in.
So, just like yesterday, he writes another reply, a little more confidently this time. At the same time he’s a little more cautious. The previous day he hadn’t been thinking at all, just letting his somewhat idiotic mind control wherever his hand wanted to go. He hadn’t really realised what he’d really been doing until it was already too late.

He’s not too nervous though, he realises as he folds the letter over and places it back on the plaque. Not anymore.

It’s an absurd and amazing thing he’s doing, though. He’s brave enough to do it, for one thing. Because if someone asked him what he wanted to be, Amanda Robertson’s mother would be the last thing he would say.

* 

The letter sits in her room all night, beside her bed, so that she can wake up and look at it if she feels insecure. She sleeps soundly that night, her mind never disturbing her. Who or what could disturb a girl who is so happy? Previously, when she’d said that maybe someone would reply, it hadn’t been serious. It had just been a silly little remark that she shrugged off almost as soon as she uttered it inside of her head. She definitely wasn’t thinking that she would actually get a reply.

She almost can’t hold the letter the next morning. It’s hard for her to fathom it. To her, it almost feels like its shocking her hands with static electricity. Like it really shouldn’t be there. Yet it is, gripped between her fingers, something that she never thought she would ever hold. It scares her slightly, knowing that someone out there had picked up the letter
and taken the time to reply. Anyone else would probably be a little scared by the thought, but she’s anything but that. When she thinks about it, someone was bound to pick it up and read it at some point, whether out of curiosity or some wicked being in the back of their mind. Sitting out in the open like that, she’s not sure what she was thinking, and that makes her chuckle slightly.

She hasn’t shown her father. He’s probably think it’s stupid, or he’d be a little scared for her and not let her go back there on her own again, which would be a shame for her. The visits are what she looks forward to in the afternoon. Now she looks forward to them even more, though she’s not sure whether it will just be an all time thing, or if it will happen multiple times.

She runs at full speed out of the door in the morning, not even thinking about saying goodbye to her father. The bus stop, though only a few hundred metres up the road, seems far out of reach now that she actually has something to aim for by going to school. The first thing she wants to do is tell her friends, though she doesn’t think that they may laugh at her or brush it off like it’s nothing.

To her, it’s anything but nothing.

When she gets to school, the letter feels like an ever-existent presence in her bag, like it’s a lump digging into her, poking her back and trying to get her attention. She’ll get it out soon, but for now she’s a little nervous about revealing it to anyone. It’s her little secret. Well, hers and the person who wrote it, but she likes to think that they’re nowhere near her now. Somewhere hiding in the shadows, like some soft of obscure guardian angel that
only jumps out when she needs him or her. The fantasies in her head are a little out there, so much that, if the real “angel” heard them, he’d probably feel a little ashamed that he’s anything but that.

He’s definitely hiding in the shadows, though, watching her every move like he’s created some sort of stop-motion animation about her life. Now, he’s watching it over thoroughly to make sure everything goes to plan.

Of course, she doesn’t know this. Instead, she’s with her friends, waiting for the right time to pull out the letter and tell them about it. She can hear her voice now. In her head, she’s excited, and so are her friends. They smile with her, and laugh, and read the letter just as many times as she did, fighting over it to see the writing and try to figure out who the actual writer was.

But that’s just in her mind. In reality, they don’t understand. They say she’s being silly. They say she’s overreacting, and that, because it’s clearly not from her mother, that she should just let it go. They say she should ignore it…

She got her hopes up.

They really don’t understand.

He can see that as he watches from afar, pretending to eat his lunch when really he’s carelessly tossing Maltesers over his shoulder. They bounce off of the wall, but no one has noticed the slightly odd situation he’s going through. No one has noticed that he’s
staring at a group of girls in a corner. If anyone else was caught doing that, they would be shunned into oblivion. He’s too isolated to be shunned.

He feels sorry for her. They tell her to forget about it. He’s not selfish enough to think that they’re telling her to forget about his work. Instead, he just looks at the fallen look on her face, like her entire world has come crashing down upon her.

That look spreads nowhere but her eyes. Her face is planted on a smile. It’s then that she says something that he never thought she would say.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

The phrase, however, is dripping with false happiness. Shaking her head, she closes her eyes for a second to stop any unwanted, unfamiliar tears to come out of them. She then folds the letter back up and puts it back in her bag, before walking off with her friends.

He can’t find the will to follow her. It doesn’t seem right with the crestfallen look on her face. She’s always been so happy up until now. But that disappointment… It was something that’s been coming to her for awhile. He’s never seen her disappointed. No one has really seen her disappointed. No one has yet, either, and he finds that sad. Sad that he’s seen her in that state before her friends ever have.

Him. The boy who no one knows.

The boy who she definitely doesn’t know, even if she has glanced at him. They even held contact for a bit.
But he’s probably forgotten now, the space that he occupied in her brain pushed out by something completely different.

No matter what happens, he’s still Fox Boy.

*

She finds the letter the next day, a little less excited about it after hearing her friends’ remarks about the previous one. She’s almost reluctant to pick it up, but she does anyway. What if there’s no reply? She doesn’t want to get her hopes up for nothing.

Luckily, when she picks it up, there is a reply. And she reads it. Over and over and over again.

For the next few days, the letters keep coming. She reads all of them. No longer does she stop to read the letter that she, herself, left there. She just flips it over, impatient to read the reply that her mother’s impersonator left for her.

Whoever writes them is scarily accurate. They seem to know about every aspect of her life. They even reflect her mother’s personality perfectly onto a simple piece of paper. Even though it’s just a little voice in her head reading the words to her as she skims over the messages, she can still imagine her mother’s voice reading it to her. Softly cooing. It almost brings tears to her eyes to remember such a memory. But she doesn’t like to cry. That would show that she’s disappointed with one aspect of her life…
But something right in the back of her head tells her that she is disappointed with one
aspect.

With that, the first hint of frustration hits her body like a full-power tidal wave. She hates
it. She *hates* it. It pains her inside to know that there’s something in her life that she can’t
be proud of. It’s mainly guilt, she thinks, because it can’t be anything else. She’s guilty
that she’s actually considering not being perfectly happy with her life. There’s people in
worse situations out there. Why can’t she accept that she’s not *them*? She’s not homeless
or starving or poor.

For once, appreciating that is harder than ever.

Her teeth gritted in pure anger, tears shoving themselves out of her tightly closed eyes,
she smashes the fifth letter she’s received in her palms, almost feeling the pain of the
person who wrote them in her own chest.

For once, she’s not perfectly content with her life.

Now, where she stands, there’s flattened grass streaked with tears and pieces of ripped up
paper.

But she doesn’t stand there anymore. She runs. Far, far away. She doesn’t want to return,
but she knows she will, part of her hoping that she’ll get another reply, the other half
hoping that she’ll never read a reply again.
She doesn’t know that, where he stands, there’s nothing but a pen fallen into the moist dirt, unused and untouched.

He won’t reply to the letters again.

*

Each day, she goes to the gardens, but they seem more bare than usual, like a barren landscape waiting to be touched by her own two feet. The days are normal, only there’s one thing different. She tries not to notice the lack of the letter sitting on her mother’s grave. The plaque, usually so pretty, lined with gold that seemed much brighter when it wasn't the only thing that lay there. Without the letters, the place didn’t seem right. The air felt cold. Her visits simply didn’t seem… right.

Like him, she doesn’t place letters anymore. It makes his job a lot easier, anyway. But she doesn’t feel it is right to put them there anymore. The person replying, no matter who it is, it isn't her mother, in the end. It angers her slightly, makes her grit her teeth and clench her fists, her nails digging into her soft, heated skin. It’s the first negativity she’s actually taken account of since her mother died, and she doesn’t like it one bit.

She’s almost lost the will to even approach the grave anymore. Day by day, her footsteps get less and less jumpy. Day by day, her gate is slower, grimmer, like there’s something holding her back. She’s not sure what that something is, but she can’t stand it being there. She’d thought her friends were right about the letters being silly. She’d believed them, if only for an instant. In the end, that instant was enough to make her give up on the letters
entirely. But she doesn’t hold it against them. Instead, she holds it against herself, the
guilt weighing down on her chest like a brick. That brick is slowly turning into an axe,
slicing her heart open like she’s in an autopsy. She’s not sure how to stop it, but she has a
small idea which she pushes back down into the ground whenever it tries to pop up.

The whole idea of it seems sick, but reasonable. After all, the letters were the only thing
that kept the relationship with her mother alive, even if it was previously just a small
sliver of hope. It was there, buried under everything else that weighed her down and
made her want to scream to the sky. Well, it would have made her want to scream. After
all, she’s Amanda Robertson. She doesn’t scream to the sky.

Or should I say, she didn’t scream to the sky.

She falls to the ground as if she’s being tortured. In a way she is; mentally. Something is
digging deep inside of her that she can’t quite discard. It’s just grazing the edge of her
skin at the moment, but it’s enough to irritate her to no end.

It’s then that she decides one thing. As she sits down to write one last letter, she doesn’t
even look at the paper. It’s her hand writing it, not her head. It does whatever it wants to
do, grazing the parchment ever-so-slightly. After this, she’ll only come back to the grave
once. To pick up the letter and tear it up. She might even burn it after. Who knows?

She certainly doesn’t. As she places the paper on the plaque, folded neatly yet with an air
of carelessness, she stands up and walks away, leaving two words behind her, written on
parchment for eternity.
I'm sorry.

So blunt. So quick. Quick enough that the words can barely be read without the reader’s mouth dropping open or the letter slipping through one’s fingers. Yet they have so much meaning to anyone who may pick it up.

Fox Boy is no exception. When he reads it, it is no sooner that the letter is on the floor again. He simply stares, his mouth slightly open, his breathing soft yet panicky. She thinks it’s her fault. It’s not. It’s his. She should no that. But a girl like her wouldn’t. Really, in the end, what does she know?

No, he’s not going to reply, if that’s what you’re thinking. Instead, he places it back on the plaque and walks away, almost as quickly as she had the previous hour.

*

Not going to reply.

Never.

Never...

That’s what he tells himself. After school, he’d run to the memorial garden before she could even lay a hand on the gate. He’s sitting now, staring, blank-faced, at the plaque. He’s beginning to think he’s more attached to her mother than she ever was. He knows that’s not true, obviously, he’s just curious.
Curious…

He needs to stop being curious, because it’s overtaking his life.

I’m sorry.

That damn phrase. He can’t take his eyes off of it. As he scans it, over and over and over again, he can’t help but tighten his grip on it ever-so-slightly with every read-through.

He’s not even sure if she’s coming to visit her mother this afternoon. With the words of the letter, so short, so truthful, he can’t help but think it was a final goodbye message that she was sending. Very cleverly done, the face that he’s questioning it proves that.

But as he looks down, he can’t help but think; he doesn’t want this to end. Why should a relationship like that come to a close just because of one tiny, stupid misunderstanding.

Stupid.

No, he’s not stupid. He, himself, is misunderstood. Just like this entire predicament he’s carelessly thrown himself into.

It’s all gone horribly wrong.

Maybe fixing it isn't by replying. Then again, maybe by replying, he’ll throw a small glimmer of hope back into her eyes. He likes seeing her hope; so few people have what he would call true “hope” these days.
He knows he’ll regret it later, but, as if his hand is controlling itself, he picks up the paper and begins to write probably the most meaningful, dramatic reply he’s ever written to her. That said, he hasn’t really written too many replies at all, but he has a feeling that none of them will ever top this despite. If he ever replies again, that is.

Something happens then that makes him drop the paper.

He’s not alone.

Someone is standing behind him. And he knows exactly who it is.

Where she stands, she’s not alone. For once, she’s not alone…

She should be angry, but she’s not. Instead, she truly feels gifted. As she looks down at the boy, she sees true fear in his eyes. Complete terror. Sickeningly, it amuses her slightly, and she can’t help but grin slightly as she holds out her hand for him to shake.

Of course, the hand he would use to shake is occupied by the pen.

“Hi, I’m Amanda.”

There’s a moment of stillness between the two. Silence… Silence…

His breath is caught in his throat, and he’s not sure what to say at all. He just stares, sure that he looks as dumbfounded and oblivious as he ever has. He can feel his eyes widening, enough so that it makes his entire face ache. Though not nearly as much as his
pounding head. The blood in his body takes that moment to become thicker, more stubborn, like it has never been before.

After these few seconds, probably equally the most blissful and terrifying seconds of his life, he finally musters up the courage to speak. It’s a stupid reply, one that will have to satisfy the girl that stands before him.

“I know.”

And, with a combination of that statement and her confused face, he feels that he can finally stop being too curious about her. Because, in the end, he knows all he needs to know about good old Amanda Robertson.